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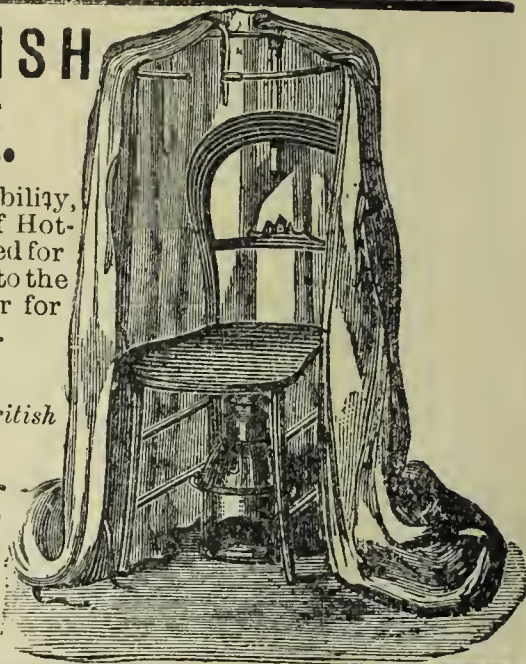
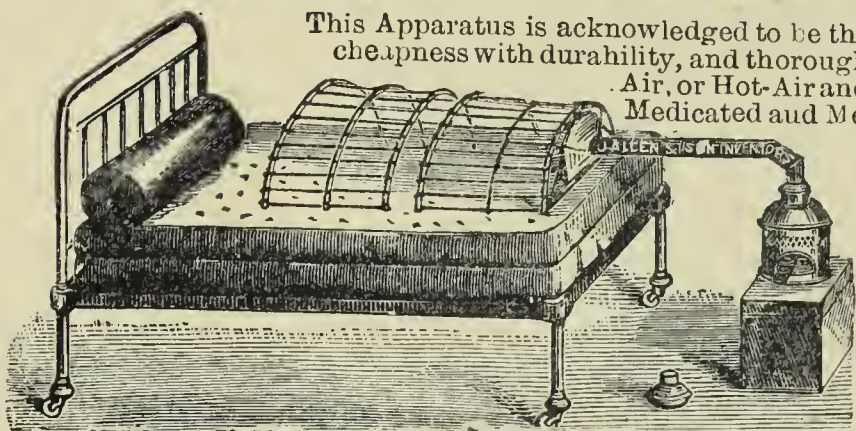
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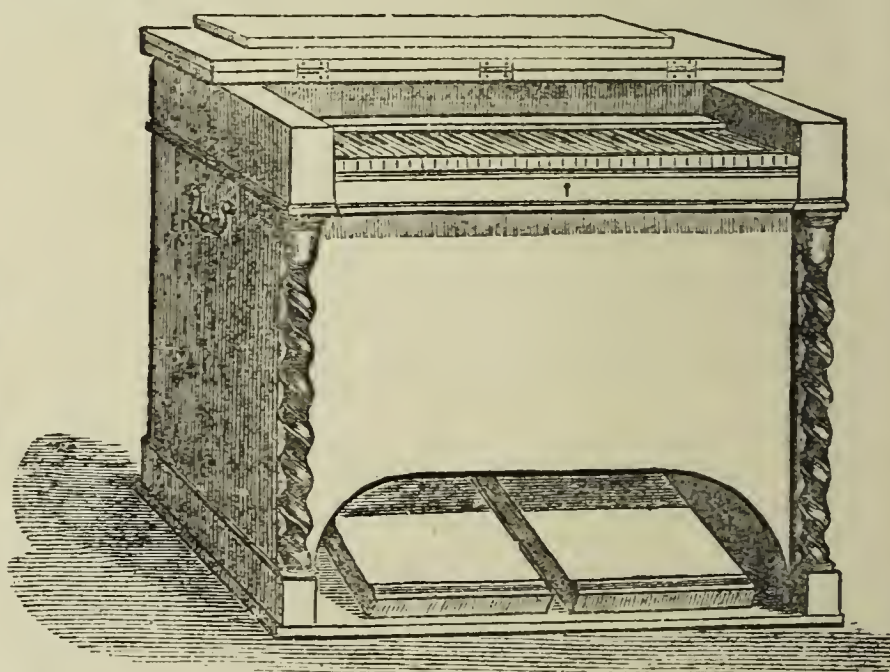
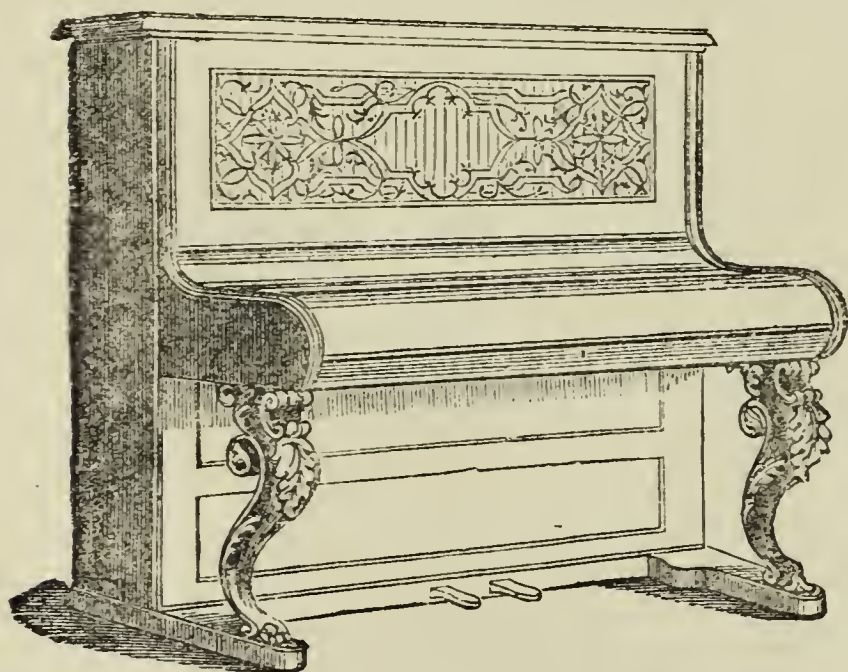
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TO

S. F À B.

CHRISTMAS, 1878.

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MOTHER BLIMBER'S LODGER.

"SHE is dying."

"Is there *no* hope, sir?"

"None. I have done all I can for her. She will be dead before the morning."

And the doctor buttoned up his great coat, opened his umbrella, and went away down the miserable street into the rain, and the darkness.

"Just my luck," grumbled the lodging-house keeper, as she closed the front door. "Why did I take her in? I might have seen death written on her face, as she stood shivering on the steps. Well, I may as well have another look at her. Perhaps I may find something."

By this time the hag had left the wretched little hall lighted by a single tallow candle, and had begun to climb the creaking stairs.

A poverty-stricken lodging house in the East End of London. A place frequented by struggling sewing girls, and specious vagabonds, waiting for something to turn up. The spot reeked with the fumes of stale tobacco; and from morning to night was heard the monotonous hum of the machine which has set up as a rival to the needle. Now and again a drunken sailor would reel into the house to sleep off the effects of his drugged drams. He would then remain a close prisoner in the hands of the keeper of the house until all his money had gone. When his cash was quite exhausted he would be turned out, like a dog. "Mother Blimber" was a woman of business, and hated credit. The specious vagabonds to whom allusion has already been made, were not permitted to darken her doors with their ruffianly presence until they had paid their footing. And as a rule, paying one's footing was an expensive matter.

"I was a fool to let her in," murmured Mother Blimber, as she climbed up the stairs, "gentle folks never pay in the long run. If she hadn't had some rings and a gold chain, she would have never got over me. I ought to have remembered that rings and gold chains won't last for ever. She lived upon 'em as long as she could, and now she's going to die. Die, and with no friends to bury her! It's downright highway robbery!"

She had ascended to the top of the house, and now she stopped in front of a door badly wanting a new coat of paint, and listened.

"There she is again! Always harping upon the same string. Talking about green fields, and blue skies, and such like stuff and nonsense! The doctor called it delirium. Delirium indeed! Why, when you have delirium tremens you see all sorts of crawling things, and demons with red wings. I ought to know because my good man died of it!"

The hag entered the room. Such a room! A broken down wash-hand stand, a shaky chair and a rickety table. A small window half filled with glass and rags, a mantelpiece in ruins above a fire-place, covered with dust. Great patches of green upon the dirty ceiling. The cheap paper falling from the walls. No vestige of a carpet.

On a bed in the corner lay a beautiful girl in the last stage of a fatal disease. Her hazel eyes were unnaturally bright, the clear olive skin of her face was disfigured by two bright red spots upon the cheeks, her long dark hair fell dishevelled and uncared for upon her poor thin arms and bosom.

Mother Blimber took up the guttering tallow candle which was burning fixed in a medicine bottle on the table, and began to explore. She looked on the mantelpiece and took up a number of small cards.

"She has pawned everything," murmured the hag, casting a vicious look at the dying girl, "everything, and she owes me a week's rent!"

The poor sufferer suddenly stopped in her wanderings. The large eyes but now dilated with delirium resumed something of their normal intelligence, and the quivering muttering lips became motionless.

"Is she dead!" whispered Mother Blimber with something like awe. "Not she!" she added, as her lodger sighed, "not she! She takes a long time dying. They always do when they live rent free."

"Where am I?" asked the patient in a poor weak voice.

"Where are you!" repeated the lodging-house keeper, brutally, "Why, where you oughtn't to be. What right have you to come here keeping honest folks out of their money? And I suppose you call yourself a lady?"

"I shan't trouble you long," replied the girl, speaking slowly, and with difficulty, "I am dying."

"Of course you are. That's no news. The doctor says you will be dead before the morning."

"Dead!" exclaimed the girl with a start. Then she clasped her thin hands and murmured, "It will be better so. Much, much better."

"I am not so sure of that," answered the hag sharply. "Who's to bury you

I should like to know. The parish is so stingy. But if they expect *me* to help them they may whistle. Haven't you any friends?"

"Friends!" murmured the dying girl. "Do you think I should be here if I had any friends? No, I have no friends."

"Well, you came here smart enough," said Mother Blimber, and then she began to read from the pawn tickets, "a silk dress, a silk cloak, a plain gold ring. Come, you must have got them from somebody. Make a clean breast of it, and tell me who I may go to. It isn't fair to cheat me out of a week's rent. I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself."

"I did not mean to cheat you," replied the poor creature. "I thought I should get strong and well, and be able to work. But you see I have been struck down and am dying. Have you no pity for me?"

"Pity! I like that!" cried the hag with a bitter laugh. "Of course I have had pity. If I hadn't, do you think I should have allowed you to remain here? Not I, I should have turned you out to die like a dog, and now I find you are so ungrateful, I am sorry I didn't."

"I am not ungrateful. Believe me, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I wish I could pay you back. As you say, you have been very kind to me."

"And now I come to think of it perhaps you may. You have no friends—no family. Why should you have a funeral at all?"

"I don't understand you?"

"I once had a medical student lodging here, he *was* a wild one! Well, he told me that the hospitals give a good round for a subject—a corpse, don't you know."

"Oh, no, no," cried the dying girl, "not that—not that. Let me rest in peace," and she raised her hands to her eyes.

"Eh! What's that!" and before her lodger could prevent it, Mother Blimber had seized a gold locket.

"You must not take it," cried the girl, holding it close to her throat, to which it was attached by a thin black riband. "Let it be buried with me."

"Stuff and nonsense," screamed the hag, "what do you mean by cheating me out of my due. Give it up, I say, or I will make you."

"You shall not have it," cried the girl with the energy of despair. "It has never left me, and it shall not leave me now. Oh that I could live until the doctor came again. He would guard it for me. Oh, you hurt me!"

"I shall hurt you worse if you don't let it go," said the hag brutally. "Come, I will stand no nonsense. Once for all, will you give it me or no?"

"No."

It was an unequal struggle, and could end in but one way. Thus it ended, the hag took the locket by main force, and the dying girl lay panting and moaning.

"I told you so. I didn't want to hurt you, but you would be obstinate. Real gold, as I live, and worth a fiver at least! And you wanted to rob me of a week's rent! Shame upon you, shame!"

As the hag said this a change occurred in the girl's face. She raised herself

for a moment on the bed, and stretched out her arms. Then she fell back, there was a deep sigh, and all was still.

The hag, rather alarmed, hurried up to the motionless body. She placed her hand upon her lodger's heart and could feel no throbbing. Then she took a bit of a broken looking glass from off the mantelpiece, and applied it to the girl's lips. The glass remained unclouded. "As I am a sinner," said Mother Blimber under her breath, "the woman's dead!"

She took off her apron and threw it over the calm, pale face.

"I hope I didn't hurt her, but it was her own fault. She was so obstinate, what could I do? It was her own fault, but I am sorry for her. Still, it's real gold, and worth at least a fiver!"

The last reflection seemed to give her some comfort. After a while she began to put the room in order. She had not been at work ten minutes when she was startled by the sound of carriage wheels. She listened, and the carriage to which the wheels belonged, seemed to stop in front of her own door. Then there was a loud ringing of the bell.

"We don't often get carriage company here," she murmured, as she hurried down the creaking stairs. "I wonder what it is."

As she spoke, the ringing of the bell was repeated.

"Your name is Blimber?" said a lady dressed in black silk, as the door was opened.

"Well, what if it is?" replied the hag, who resented the tone of command in which the question had been asked.

"Leave her to me, madam," said a man who had accompanied the lady, and who had just emerged from the carriage, "I will deal with her in less than no time."

"And who may *you* be?" asked the lodging-house keeper, setting her arms akimbo.

"Sergeant Starkey, of the Detective Police. Come, Mother Blimber, stand aside and let us in."

If a thunderbolt had fallen just in front of her, the hag could not have been more astonished. She whined out an apology, and invited her visitors to enter.

"A lady has been lodging with you for the last three weeks. Come, no nonsense, you won't take me in. Yes or no—has she?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is she?" this time it was the lady in black silk who spoke.

"Oh, she was such a sweet thing, poor dear, and I am sure I quite loved her like a mother."

"Where is she?"

"She is up stairs, my lady, but don't you think you had better let me—"

"Lead me to her. Don't speak a word, but lead me to her."

"Certainly, my lady."

Again Mother Blimber climbed the creaking stairs, this time accompanied by the lady in the black silk dress.

"You won't mind," she began, as she opened the door. The sentence

was never finished, the lady in black pushed past, and hurried up to the bed.

She started back and exclaimed, "dead!" then she fell upon her knees and buried her face in her hands.

"Yes, indeed, my lady, the poor dear died only an hour ago. I looked after her and got her the best medical attendance—at a great expense, my lady—at a great expense. I quite looked upon her as a daughter, my lady—poor dear."

The lady in the black dress, with cold, tearless eyes, rose from the bedside and walked to the mantelpiece. She looked about, and seeing the pawn tickets, took them up to examine them.

"You have robbed her," she said, turning sharply upon the hag.

"Robbed her! What do you mean, my lady?"

"What do I mean? Why, this, that if you don't immediately give me the locket you have in your hand, I send for the police."

Mother Blimber began to whine.

"I am sure I have got nothing, my lady, except this, which the poor dear gave me as a keepsake just before she died. I don't mind showing it you, or even selling it to you, but remember it was a free gift from the dear darling, just before she died."

The lady in black seized the locket, then she paused and looked at the poor girl lying dead upon the bed. She knelt down, and gently kissed her on the forehead. For a moment her features softened, but only for a moment. Immediately the tearless eyes, the tightly compressed lips, the frowning brow, resumed their normal condition.

She walked to the table, upon which the candle was burning, so that she might avail herself of the light. Mother Blimber started as she looked upon the stern, unforgiving face. As she looked, she shuddered.

"Life for life, death for death!" cried the lady in black, as she opened the locket. There was a gleam of savage triumph as she gazed upon its contents. The locket contained a portrait.

THE STORY.

PART I. — PLOT.

CHAPTER I.

NOT A BAD FELLOW.

SCENE, the card room of a club. Time, five o'clock in the morning. Many of the tables were empty. The candles with their shades had been blown out, and the used cards were lying scattered about, resting ready for the weary waiters to remove them. As the time passed the room lost more and more of its visitors. Since midnight, men had been dropping in and looking at the play. Some had come from the recently closed opera houses, others from dances, others from earlier clubs. They had called for brandies and sodas, or lemon and seltzers, and had watched for a time the play of their fellow members, indulging now and then in an outside bet. But since four o'clock these newcomers had themselves departed, and their places had not been filled up.

Still play went on. At one table near a window sat a man about forty years of age. He had dined at the club, and since entering the card room, had steadily engaged in the pleasures and excitements of the gambling table. He had moved from group to group, cutting in at every opportunity. At the commencement of the night there had been no difficulty in finding a seat, but as the hours crept by he sometimes found himself idle. It was then when he waited for his turn that he "plunged" deeply, betting on every rubber and backing every turn up card.

As six o'clock struck, the last of the lookers on resumed their over-coats and walked out, leaving the man playing with an opponent.

"I should say he must be broke," observed one of the deserters to another, as he lighted a cigar in the hall.

"Yes, the luck has certainly been terribly against him. What a fool a man is to kick against luck. He ought to have got up hours ago," and the two friends got into a Hansom and drove towards St. James Street.

The departure of these men seemed to change the fortunes of the player at the table. Ecarté had become the game, and time after time he turned up the king and won. His opponent was a youngster from Aldershot, who had been gaining large sums at the commencement of the evening, but who now seemed unable to do anything but lose.

"I say, Dashleigh, old man," he said at last. "I am afraid I must pull up. It's awfully late, don't you know, and I am terribly done up. Frightful head, don't you know."

"Just as you please, old man," returned Dashleigh. "But if you played longer the luck would turn, and you would begin to win again."

"I don't seem to care about it," replied the youngster with a yawn, "good night, or rather good morning, by Jove it's getting on for eight."

And the boy with pale cheeks and blood-shot eyes left the room. Dashleigh got up from the table at which he had been seated, and stood near the mantelpiece looking into a glass. He was a handsome man. He had dark brown hair streaked with grey, black piercing eyes, and a flowing beard. He stood over six feet in his patent leather boots, and his frame was broad and muscular. By his intimates he was considered "not a bad fellow" but even his intimates knew him slightly. Ladies, who, in spite of their advancing years, had not got past the days of their boarding school gush, voted him "a most delightful man—so charming and handsome!" As he looked at himself in the glass there was a very sinister smile upon his pale care-worn countenance. He tied a silk wrapper round his throat, and prepared to leave.

"Oh, Dashleigh, don't go," said another member, who had been asleep on a sofa, "stick to your luck, my man, and have a game with me."

The speaker was a rival gambler—a man who divided with Dashleigh the reputation of being the coolest hand in Clubdom. Dashleigh hesitated, his account was about fairly balanced, and he would have been glad to have gone home. The night before he had had to play for honour, life itself. At one time he had lost so hopelessly that he knew unless he could repair his fortune he would become a defaulter. But luckily, the youngster from Aldershot had pulled him through.

"I don't think we can begin another game at this hour," said Dashleigh, "it's against the rules of the club."

"Nonsense, my boy," replied the tempter, "the rule was rescinded by the committee three weeks ago. Come, let us ring for new cards and a cup of coffee."

Rather reluctantly Dashleigh laid aside his hat, coat, and neckerchief.

"After all, I have the luck with me now," he thought, "why shouldn't I stick to it."

The waiter attended the summons, and in a quarter of an hour the two men sat facing one another sipping their coffee and playing their cards, in the broad daylight—under the rays of the sun.

It would have been well for Dashleigh if he had resisted the voice of the tempter. The luck turned once again. Instead of winning, he now lost, and in a couple of hours or so he was over a thousand pounds to the bad. He had plunged wildly, often offering his opponent double or quits—terms that had as often been accepted.

Dashleigh got up.

"What do you want?" asked the other.

"I am going to ring for fresh cards—these have brought me the most brutal luck."

"You needn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not intend to play any more."

Dashleigh turned very pale. He steadied himself by holding on to a chair. Then he said,

"Do you know what our account is?"

"Perfectly," said his opponent, referring to a note book which had rested upon the table beside him, "you owe me say a thousand pounds. You will certainly give me a cheque for that amount before this evening, or take the consequences."

"I may be rather pressed."

"I have nothing to do with that. Now Dashleigh, let us understand one another. I daresay you have read in your school days *Bombastes Furioso*. Don't you remember the place where the one lion considers the other lion a boar. Well, *mon cher*, history has repeated itself. In this club we both are lions. Strange to say that my opinion coincides with the opinion entertained by the zoological acquaintance of Bombastes."

"What do you mean by all this rigmarole?"

"This, Captain Dashleigh, that unless you send me a cheque by to-night, you had better purchase a pistol and blow your brains out, as you will be a dishonoured man; and now good-bye."

Dashleigh was left alone. He sat down, and once more consulted his notebook.

"It's right enough," he murmured. "The fellow tells the truth. I don't see how I can weather the storm this time. Wilson is no use. I can't draw him—it's far too big. What shall I do?"

He walked from the club into the busy throng of men. Half a dozen cab-drivers, seeing him in evening dress, made towards him and invited him to avail himself of their hansoms. He seemed to be lost in thought, and sauntered listlessly away with his hands thrust into the pockets of his light overcoat. By and bye his wayward footsteps led him into a broad thoroughfare in the west end of the town. His unusual costume naturally attracted some attention, not only amongst the street arabs but even amongst the occupiers of the carriages drawn up beside the shop-skirted pavements.

If Dashleigh had been in a less desperate mood he would have noticed that after leaving the thoroughfare *en route* for his chambers he was followed by a footman in livery. This person dodged his footsteps for a couple of hours, and then returned to his employer with the following summarised report.

The gentleman he had followed was Captain Dashleigh, living in chambers in Duke Street. He had bought a revolver at a well-known gunmaker, which was to be sent home by four o'clock. The shopman had noticed nothing strange about his manner. The footman had had a chat with Captain Dashleigh's man.

Captain Dashleigh's man had given his master a good character from a servant's point of view. The Captain was generous to a fault, and never looked after his change. He belonged to rather a rowdy set, much given to late hours and Sunday dinners at Richmond and elsewhere. He was fond of travel, and generally selected Monaco, or rather Monte Carlo, for his head quarters. From thence he would make descents upon Trouville, Baden Baden, and other fashionable resting places. He had no settled income, but lived entirely upon the proceeds of the board of green cloth, Tattersall's, and the city. Captain Dashleigh's servant feared that there was something seriously wrong with his master. He had searched the pockets of his evening clothes and had found memoranda suggesting that he had experienced very heavy losses in the last night's play. It would seem that he owed something like a thousand pounds. The Captain had lost before, but never to this extent. His credit was quite exhausted. When he had lost before the Captain had made frantic efforts to recover himself, now he was quite resigned, and had gone to bed to sleep. From this the servant imagined that the master had thrown up the game. He intended to look out for a new engagement that very afternoon. He would not wait until he had lost his place through "a death in the family." This, and much more to the same effect, the footman who followed Dashleigh reported to his employer. In the meanwhile the object of all this discourse was lying perfectly composed, asleep in his bedroom in Duke's Street, St. James. He slept heavily for several hours, and then woke with a start, and heard the Palace clock hard by strike the hour of five. He rose, and making a hasty toilette, soon appeared in his sitting-room. It was furnished in the usual gay bachelor fashion. Coloured photographs of pictures exhibited in the Paris *salon* were mingled with English hunting-pieces, and emblems of the chase. Here was a rack given over to favourite pipes, there a rest for walking sticks and riding whips. In one of the corners a regulation sword in an old leather case leaned against the wall, in another a fishing rod showed that the Captain sometimes indulged in the sport of Isaac Walton.

"I may as well put my things in order," he murmured, and opened a desk. It was filled with billets-doux in female hands, copies of writs, bills of foreign hotels. He touched a spring, and a secret drawer became revealed. From this receptacle he extracted a packet of faded letters. He sighed as he looked at them, and was on the point of tearing them up when there was a knock at the door, and his servant entered, carrying a parcel and two envelopes.

"Just come sir," said the man as he placed them on the table. Then he hesitated and continued, "Perhaps, sir, you wouldn't mind writing me a character. It might be useful to me some day."

"So it might," thought Dashleigh, and he sat down and scribbled a few lines. His servant thanked him effusively and asked him if he purposed dining at home.

"I don't know," returned Dashleigh, opening the parcel. "You can go out if you like."

"He means it," thought the man as he left the room. "Poor devil—well, it must have come sooner or later."

Dashleigh, left alone, took the pistol from its case, and examined it. Then he calmly opened one of the letters.

"As I thought," he said, "no chance for me. I shall be a defaulter to-morrow. Hang it, I can't stand that. After all it's only a moment. It will save a precious lot of trouble."

He had asked the gunmaker to send him some ammunition with the revolver, and his order had been obeyed. He leisurely loaded the revolver, and seemed to be bracing himself to make an effort.

When the revolver was loaded he paused for a moment, and then the second letter that had been brought to him by his servant attracted his attention. He took it up. The superscription was in an unknown hand. The letter was bulky and very light, and crinkled in his hand.

He put down the revolver for a moment, and opened the letter. He uttered an exclamation of surprise. Some one had sent him, anonymously, one thousand pounds in Bank of England notes.

CHAPTER II.

A TRAVELLER FROM LAUSANNE.

FAR away from London with its smoke and noise two girls were chatting in a Devonshire Lane. They were both very pretty.

"I wonder when he will come?" said the first.

"By this train you may be sure," answered the other. "Fanny, I believe you flirted with him at Lausanne. Now don't deny it—you know you did."

Fanny tossed her pretty little head and pouted. "I am sure, Amy, I thought him very silly. Not at all my idea of what a man should be."

"Why, Mr. Harold is in the Service," said Amy, in a tone of awe.

"That may be," returned the other, "but a man may be in the Service, and yet may be a great noodle. In my opinion Mr Harold Harrington is a great noodle."

"I am sure you did not tell him so when you were at Oouchy," said Amy, with just a touch of spite.

"It would have been rude to have done so," replied her friend. "Besides he was the only presentable man in the hotel. Well Mamma's asked him, and I am sure I have nothing to do with it. You may have him, Amy, if you think he will be of any use to you. I don't want him," and again the pretty girl tossed her head.

Fanny Mostyn was the heiress of Jonathan Mostyn, Esq., of Mostyn Manor, Cravington, Devon. When people looked at her they wondered that her father should have had such a daughter. She was pretty and good natured, and if she had a fault in the world it was a proneness to jealousy. This failing had not at present shown itself to any great extent, as there had been as yet no

particular cause to call it into existence. Some men who had met her on the Continent had called her "a flirt," and they to a certain extent were right. She was fond of attention and admiration (all women are), and when she found a young man willing to dance attendance upon her, she let him have his own sweet way. In spite of this she would have shuddered at the idea of inflicting pain upon any one, and would have been absolutely shocked at the notion of behaving to a man as a jilt treats a discarded lover. She had been well educated during the last five years—the time that her father had been in possession of his present fortune. She spoke plain English, alas! adulterated with a little "genteel slang" which gave her enemies an opportunity of saying that she was "fast." Of course she had enemies amongst her own sex because she was pretty and amiable. Her bitterest foes called her "darling" to her face and "poor Fanny" behind her back, and hated her cordially. To sum up, she did not seem to mind much what any one said or thought about her, and was accordingly happy, much to the disgust of those who disliked her.

However, whatever may have been thought about the merits or demerits of Miss Fanny, there was but one opinion about the character of her father. The whole country from one end of it to the other stigmatised him, "a dreadful creature," and the whole country showed discrimination. Jonathan Mostyn, Esq., as he told you before he had been five minutes in your company, was "self-made," and if this was really the case, he had certainly (to quote from one of poor Tom Robertson's charming pieces) "taken a very bad specimen of a man for his model." No one knew exactly how he had made his money, but certainly he had contrived to become very wealthy. He had a house in South Kensington, a place in the country, carriages, horses and servants—of late years he had rather shunned town, and had spent the major part of his time either abroad or in Devonshire. He was supposed to have "retired from business," and scarcely ever was seen in the haunts where merchants most do congregate. However, the more London-loving of the gentry of Devonshire had occasionally, (when he was known to be in England) seen his carriage and horses standing outside the doors of a private bank in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross. So far as it could be ascertained, he was neither associated with the management of this bank, nor had he opened an account with its directors, in fact, his connection with the place was most mysterious, and gave rise to much speculation in the minds of the scandal lovers of Cravington. Beyond this vague relationship with the Bank, nothing was now known of his business. As to the past some said that he had insured ships that had sunk at most opportune times, while others insisted that he had been a sleeping partner in a large pawn-broking establishment. Mr Mostyn never gratified the curiosity of his neighbours by admitting how his money had been obtained. After he had said that he was a self-made man, and had boasted of having commenced life with half-a-crown in his pocket, he invariably concluded his autobiography with the words "and look at me now, sir, I am as rich as I wish to be, and I can't say fairer than that, now can I?" He had married in the course of his career a lady who brought him a small sum in money, and a large

stock in temper, Mr Mostyn feared but two people in the world—the first was his wife, the second was his daughter. The feeling in the two cases had this difference—that the fear for his daughter was interwoven with a good deal of affection. So to speak, Mrs. Mostyn used violence to gain her ends, while Fanny was contented with persuasion. The result was the same in both instances, Mr. Mostyn was a picture of submission in the presence of his wife and daughter—obstinate as he was in general, he never knew any will that was not the will of Mrs. and Miss Mostyn. An exemplification of Fanny's persuasive powers could be found for instance in the appointment of Amy Lawson. At first Mr. Mostyn had resolutely refused to permit his daughter to add another person to the household in the shape of a companion, but after a conversation of five minutes he had given his consent to the arrangement; and Amy had been the constant associate of his daughter for the last two years. They were fast friends—more like affectionate sisters than employer and employed.

"I do believe that's him," cried Fanny, as the sound of wheels were heard in the lane.

The two girls had not long to wait. In a few minutes a dog-cart driven by a servant in the gorgeous Mostyn livery came up to them. Seated beside the servant was a young man with the regulation moustache and whiskers of a British subaltern. He jumped down and with some nervousness approached Fanny.

"I am so glad to see you," he said, taking her by the hand, "and you too, Miss Lawson. If you will let me, I will send on my traps by the dog-cart, and walk with you to the Manor."

"Thanks very much," returned Fanny coldly, "but it's a long way, and I am afraid you will be tired."

"Tired! Why, I have marched heaps and heaps of miles at Aldershot."

"The more reason you should have rest now."

The young man smiled, and bidding the groom to go on without him, placed himself between the two young ladies.

"You are both looking very well," he said.

"I wish I could return the compliment. You are as pale as a ghost."

"Well, I am rather seedy. To tell the truth I have been keeping very late hours, and spending a heap of money."

"Very wrong; why did you do that?"

"Because you told me I was slow at Ouchy, and I wanted to improve myself. It was *very* kind of you to ask me to Mostyn Manor."

"Oh, I didn't ask you. It's all papa's and mamma's doing."

"Bless them both," said Harold, with a bright smile, and chatting and laughing the three young people walked towards the house in which the fate of two of them was to be decided.

CHAPTER III.

MOSTYN MANOR.

MOSTYN Manor looked ashamed of itself after it changed its name. A few years before the date of this history, it had been known as Cravington House, and was then a tumble-down dwelling with Elizabethan proclivities. It boasted in those days a good deal of red brick frontage, with stone copings, and a large number of curiously shaped chimneys. It had been closed for a long time, as its last possessor had decided upon seeking ruin in London at the expense of his estate in the country. After a while the house and its surroundings were sold by auction, and Jonathan Mostyn, Esq., became their lucky purchaser. The "self-made man" travelled down to Cravington with an architect to look over the property.

"I shall call it Mostyn Manor, Jones," said he in the course of the journey.

"Capital name, I am sure, Mr. Mostyn," replied the obsequious architect. "I suppose the Manor extends—"

"It ain't a Manor in your sense of the word," interrupted the courteous Mostyn. "No, but if I buy a place as I have bought this, I don't see why I shouldn't have the full value out of it. It must be Mostyn something, and as 'Mostyn Manor' gives us two M's, I call it 'Mostyn Manor.'"

"A most excellent reason, I am sure," murmured Mr. Jones—he added in an audible undertone as if he were thinking aloud, "Really, Mr. Mostyn is a most remarkable man."

"Well, Mr. Jones, I came into London town with half-a-crown in my pocket, and look at me now, sir, I am as rich as I wish to be, and I can't say fairer than that, now can I?"

Employer and employed duly arrived at Cravington, where Mr. Mostyn chartered a carriage to carry them over to the Manor. They reached the house without any adventure.

"It's beautiful scenery, Mr. Mostyn," observed the architect, as they passed through some lovely Devonshire lanes.

"Yes, that lot, Jones," replied Mr. Mostyn with condescension, "that bit there with the green leaves and the mill stream ain't at all bad—it reminds me of Wandsworth. But that kind of thing isn't much in my line—but I daresay it will amuse the missus—I mean Mrs. Mostyn and the young lady."

"Quite so, quite so, Mr. Mostyn," replied the easily convinced architect. "Perhaps I have an eye for beauty. My profession—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mostyn. "It's a bit of your work to like beauty, ain't it?"

"I see you are a wit, Mr. Mostyn," said the other, forcing a laugh.

"Am I? I daresay I am," replied Mostyn with complacency. "I generally can do what I wish, and if jokes paid I've no doubt I could turn 'em out easily enough. But then you see jokes as a rule don't pay, and there's where it is!"

When Mr. Mostyn arrived at his new house, he walked on to the lawn, followed by his architect, and surveyed the South Front in silence for some minutes

"It will restore beautifully, sir," said the professional man after a pause—"the Tudor period, I see."

"Yes, it isn't bad," replied Mostyn with decision. "It requires a deal of work, though."

"Certainly, Mr. Mostyn," and the architect drew out of his pocket a large note book and pencil. He opened the book, moistened the lead of the pencil, and seemed to be waiting for orders.

"First, you see those chimneys?"

"Yes sir, very fine—Elizabethan."

"Well, you must clap a cowl upon every one." The architect stared. Mostyn continued, "Oh, I know what I am about, I ain't going to have smoky chimneys to please anybody!"

"Quite so, my dear sir, quite so, but the fixing of cowls upon chimneys is a matter you can safely entrust to the builder."

"Oh, I see—not your line of work, ah, very well—but just put it down for fear I should forget it. Ah, here's something you *can* do. I don't like all that red brick—you must cover it with stucco."

Mr. Jones complied, but was rather staggered by the order. To turn an old picturesque, ivy-covered mansion, into a modern white-washed house, such as one sees in a London square, seemed to the architect little short of sacrilege; he argued, however, that did he refuse the task, some rival would undertake it, and so sighed and added a few lines to his note-book.

"And now let us go in," said Mr. Mostyn.

The house contained several fine, lofty rooms, with carved oak-ceilings, and wainscoted walls.

"A little white wash over that dirty wood," said Mr. Mostyn, pointing with his stick upwards, "and a lively, showy paper, on these ugly boards, will soon set things to rights."

"A fine staircase, Mr. Mostyn," said Mr. Jones, when they stood in the hall, "I have seldom seen a finer one. How very effective oak is, Mr. Mostyn, isn't it?"

"Well, it ain't my style, sir," replied the great Mostyn, "you must take it down, sir, and put up a stone one in its stead."

"I daresay I can manage it, Mr. Mostyn, although it's right to tell you it won't be quite in keeping with the rest of the house."

"What of that? I bought this house to do what I pleased with it, not to be tied down to anything. And now I think we have been through all the rooms. I shall want you to see that everything is safe."

"Certainly, Mr. Mostyn."

"Stucco the front."

"Ye'es, Mr. Mostyn."

"And then you must throw in somewhere or other a couple of billiard rooms, three conservatories, four boudoirs for the ladies, and half a dozen smoking-rooms—and if you could manage it, a covered skittle-ground."

"Yes, Mr. Mostyn."

And Mr. Jones subsequently did his best to carry out Mr. Mostyn's instructions. The result was, Mostyn Manor looked ashamed of itself. The house was a strangely aggressively white mansion, with windows let in (so it seemed), anyhow. In front of the door was a portico, after the fashion of Eton Square, and really it was quite a surprise to those who visited Mr. Mostyn to find that the builder had neglected to furnish the basement floor with an area.

"How are you, Mr. Harrington?—I am glad to welcome you to Mostyn Manor."

So said Mr. Mostyn as Harold passed through the garden, attended by Amy and Fanny, and reached the door. Guest and host shook hands warmly, and then the latter turned round and addressed Amy. "You're wanted, Miss Lawson. Mrs. Mostyn wasn't aware that she had given you leave to go out."

"Nonsense, papa," cried Fanny, "Amy and I are no longer children. We can do what we like."

"You can do what you like, Fanny, but Miss Lawson is—"

"Is my friend, papa, and shares my privileges. Come, Mr. Harrington, you must be tired after your long journey. John will show you your room, and then if you feel equal to a cup of tea before dinner, you will find Mamma and all of us in the drawing-room."

With this the girls left Harold to his own devices—in other words, to take off his coat and wraps. Mostyn heartily assisted him.

"Mind, Mr. Harrington, this is Liberty Hall. Do just what you please. Order about the servants as much as you like. They are well paid for it, you may be sure!"

The butler and footman (who had taken Harold's stick and hat) grinned a ghastly grin in acknowledgment of their master's waggery. "What a cad Mostyn is!" said the butler to the footman afterwards, as they left the hall together. And Harold forced a smile.

"As Fanny said, you will find us in the drawing-room, if you like five o'clock tea. As for myself I confess I don't care about spoiling my dinner."

Having delivered himself of this statement, Mostyn looked with satisfaction into a mirror that was hanging on the wall. The glass pictured a red-haired red-whiskered man of five-and-forty, with bushy eyebrows, small blue eyes, boasting (the right one) of a squint. His expression suggested a mean, grasping, cunning nature, his height was five feet three inches, his weight, to give his description *à la* "Bell's Life" about thirteen stone. In fact, he was not at all the person one would naturally choose for a bosom friend. After a glance at the glass he walked up-stairs, and made the best of his way to the drawing-room.

"Why, Sarah, you are fine!"

Mrs. Mostyn smiled complacently at her husband's compliment and smoothed her skirts. She was a vulgar, red-faced, falsehaired woman of forty, wearing a bright dress of scarlet moiré antique be-laced and be-flounced to the last degree. Her fingers were covered with jewels, her neck served as a rest for a gorgeous golden

chain of pantomimic proportions, and her ears were literally dragged down by the weight of her pendants. The room in which she was seated, was in keeping with her costume. All the colours of the rainbow fought for mastery in the wall paper, silk, satin, and velvet claimed the furniture for their own, and divided the spoil in equal proportions between them, ormolu, walnut, oak, mahogany, iron, silver, steel and gold were to be found in every direction. A school-boy would have described the over-coloured over-crowded apartment as "a hopeless mess," and the schoolboy, if not elegant, would, at least, have been right. Mrs. Mostyn was seated in solitary grandeur as her husband entered. "So he's come. Well, I'm glad of it. If we can't manage it now when he's amongst us, we shall never be able to do it."

"I'm not at all sure it is the best thing, my dear," said Mostyn. "Since I asked him, I've heard a good many ugly rumours."

"Nonsense, Mr. Mostyn," interrupted his wife angrily, "you must be mad to believe them. Why, Mr. Harrington's guardian is as rich as he can be, and is sure to leave him everything. Besides, he's a gentleman bred and born, and that goes a very long way."

"Yes, but it don't go the whole journey. However, it don't matter much. I shall be going up to town to-morrow, and then I'll find out how the wind blows."

"You can do what you please, Mr. Mostyn," observed his better-half, tossing her head haughtily. "But just remember this. While Mr. Harrington's here you will treat him civilly."

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," but Mr. Mostyn added in an undertone, "Quite so, however I'll keep my weather eye open for all my politeness."

At this moment the doors were thrown back and a servant ushered in the freshly-arrived guest. Mrs. Mostyn gave Harold a very hearty welcome.

"You must not expect too much of us, Mr. Harrington. Of course the country can't compare with London. We have got no opera, scarcely any gaiety—the only ball worth going to is the county one. And we don't go to that, because one meets such a mixed set—don't we, Mr. Mostyn?"

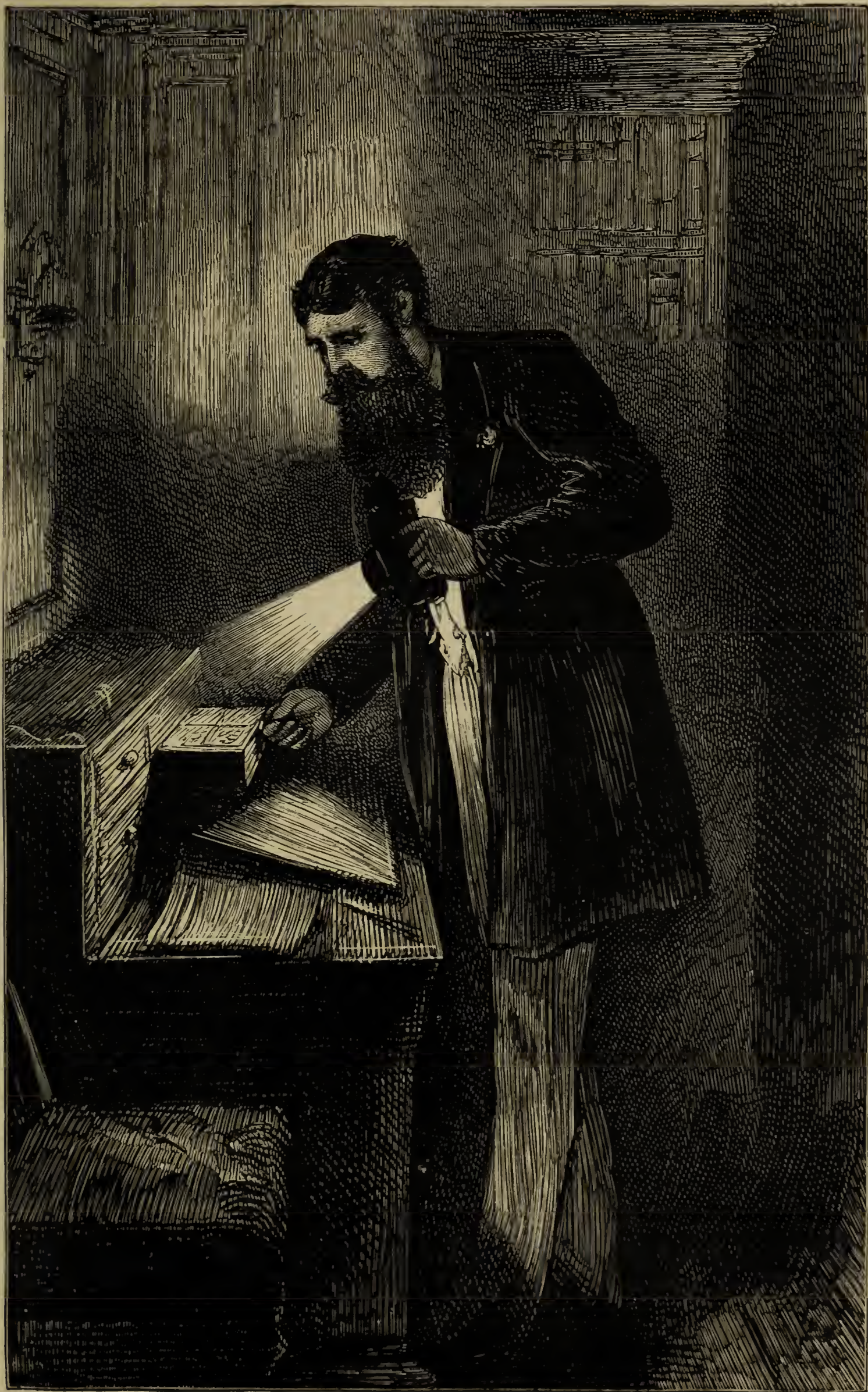
"We do, my dear—a deucedly low lot!"

"And so we don't go. We've got no Rotten Row and no Park."

"I am sure, my dear Mrs. Mostyn, if it came to a comparison in beauty, Rotten Row and the Park wouldn't have much chance with Devonshire," observed Harold.

"How kind of you to say so, Mr. Harrington. But, ah, here comes my daughter Fanny. You remember her at Lausanne. Do you find her changed? What, you have met before to-day! So much the better, so much the better. Mind you two must be very great friends indeed. I can assure you I regard you quite as one of the family, Mr. Harrington."

"Indeed!" thought Fanny, who had just entered the room. "Ah, now I see why Mr. Harrington has been brought to Devonshire. But it won't do, my dearest mamma, it won't do. I will have no one forced upon me. I shall choose for myself."



"Before a writing-table stood a man holding a dark lantern."—See page 53.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN DASHLEIGH'S ACCOUNT.

WHEN the quarter after ten in the morning is chimed in the clock tower at Westminster, Charing Cross generally presents a very lively scene. Crowds of omnibuses, cabs, and broughams, bound for the city, fill the road in front of Nelson's Column, and throng in an ever-busy stream into the Strand. Here and there a young stock-broker disports himself in a trap behind a large horse and in front of a small tiger. Wealthy members of the People of Israel, too, appear now and then in very gorgeous apparel. On the foot-path every class of society is represented, from the policeman to the peer. Large numbers of well-dressed, intelligent-looking men leave Charing Cross for Whitehall, or Pall Mall, *en route* for the Treasury and the War Office—these are they who are laughed at in the comic papers as Her Majesty's Civil Servants. In spite of the sneers and jeers to which they are subjected, these intelligent working men (a fair proportion of whom are graduates of Oxford and Cambridge) will set through a much harder day's work than ever enters into the arrangements of a professional joke-maker, or a non-professional city clerk. Hosts of young men with pocket-books chained to their waists rush hurriedly into the various banks that have their head-quarters in Charing Cross and its neighbourhood; numbers of errand boys carrying baskets on their arms, or trays on their heads, slouch along whistling popular melodies; police constables, having nothing better to do at the moment, glance at the goods displayed in shop windows, or persecute orange women. The tradesmen having arrived from their country seats (they have been driven to the station in their own carriages) begin to think about making money by the sale of their wares. In fact, the West End of London by the half hour after ten o'clock is fairly awake.

At a quarter to eleven one morning, a cab harnessed to a showy grey horse, and upon whose step-board a flashily dressed groom was standing, passed unsteadily through Charing Cross (the gentlemen inside could not drive) and, taking a turning to the left, soon pulled up with a jerk in front of a building composed chiefly of bath stone and plate glass. The cab contained Henry Backhouse Wilson, manager of the Steel and Loadstone Bank, and the building before which the cab drew up was the Steel and Loadstone Bank itself.

Mr. Wilson got out of his cab after the groom (four sizes too large for any occupation having to do with the stable) had placed himself at the head of the gigantic horse. It was a fancy of Mr. Wilson to have every thing about him large, and to do every thing he did in a large round hand sort of manner. The result was, he seemed a living caricature as he stood before his horse and cab,

he attracted attention by the height of his hat, the size of his watch chain, and the breadth and number of his rings. His face was perfectly ruffianly—low forehead, fierce dark eyes and a villanously cruel mouth. His complexion was swarthy, and his hair had that curly blackness generally associated with the head of a half caste. In spite of these disadvantages, or rather, perhaps, on account of them, his whiskers and moustache were carefully trimmed, and pomade left its beautifying trace upon every lock of his raven tresses. He wore clothes made by the best tailors, but clothes of a style against which they (the tailors) had protested most vehemently. Had he not included a red neck cloth fastened with a pin attached to a gigantic display of jewels in his ensemble, his costume would have been a most appropriate addition to the wardrobe of Mr. Champagne Charley, to be worn perhaps when that music-hall celebrity was unhappily called upon to assume mourning for his mother.

After looking at his cab, Mr. Wilson gave some directions to his groom, and then turned round to enter the bank. As he did this, a policeman saluted him. For a moment the manager was startled, and his right hand sought unconsciously his coat pocket—immediately recovering his self-possession he returned the bow politely, perhaps a little too politely, and hurriedly entered the building.

He stopped for a moment on what in a French house would be called the *entresol* on his way to the first floor, where were stationed his clerks. He stopped, took a key from his pocket, and opened the glass door of his private room. He entered this apartment (which was small in comparison with the size of the house) and seated himself in a cane-bottomed arm-chair. On a little table in front of him was a packet of letters. He drew off his gloves, dipped a pen into the ink, and proceeded rapidly to dispose of his correspondence. He divided his letters into two heaps, the first heap contained notes upon which he had written a few words, serving as a guide to the clerks, who had to prepare the answers. The second heap was reserved for communications requiring his own personal attention. On this occasion, the second heap consisted of but one letter—it commenced, "My dear sir," and was signed "J. Mostyn."

"Good morning, sir," said a man entering the room.

"Ah, Poulson, is that you—anything of importance—eh?"

Mr. Poulson was a person of a mature age, say, five-and-forty, consequently some seven years the senior of Mr. Wilson, in whose service he was employed as confidential clerk. He was not a gentleman of pleasing appearance. Although his manners were soft, there was an innate lack of refinement about him, telling of a vulgar origin. His eyes were small, his hair sandy-coloured, and his expression the very reverse of confidence-inspiring.

"Well, no, sir," replied the new comer. "A cheque of Bannister was presented this morning for £32, 10s.—and as Bannister's account amounted (after I had deducted the money for the cheque book I gave him yesterday) to £32, 8s. 6d. I——"

"You wrote 'not sufficient effects,' and returned it?"

"I did, sir."

"Quite right ; Mr. Bannister should be more careful. Anything else, Mr. Poulson ?"

"No, sir—nothing particular. By-the-bye, Captain Dashleigh called yesterday after you had left. He was disappointed at not finding you in, and said he would call at eleven o'clock to-day. Shall you be in to him, sir ?"

"Dashleigh," murmured Wilson. Then he looked at the letter lying by itself, "The very man ! Yes," he added aloud, "you can say that I am here, Mr. Poulson. Please give these letters to Mr. Just and Mr. Tompkins, and bring the answers to me for signature as soon as possible."

"Very well, sir," said Mr. Poulson, and, gathering up the letters as directed, he left the room.

Wilson opened the drawer in the table in front of him, and re-reading the note that remained, placed it in the receptacle. As his hand entered the drawer, it came in contact with a revolver. He glanced hastily through the glazed door to see that he was unobserved, and then drew out the pistol. He examined it for a couple of minutes, "Loaded," he murmured. "Six barrels—six chances. Not yet I think, not yet," and he replaced the weapon in the drawer. As he did this, the door opened, and Mr. Poulson re-entered the room. "Could he have seen me?" thought Wilson, and he hastily closed the drawer.

"I hope I did not startle you, sir," said Mr. Poulson in soft accents. "I knocked twice before I came in. I don't think you could have heard me."

Wilson looked at his clerk with a glance of keen suspicion, and then observed, "No, Mr. Poulson ; no, you did not startle me. What is it ?"

"You told me to tell you, sir, when Captain Dashleigh called."

"Quite so ; but surely it isn't eleven yet."

"Pardon me, sir, big Ben has just struck the hour. Captain Dashleigh is in the clerks' office, shall I tell him to step in ?"

"If you please, Mr. Poulson."

"Very well, sir," and the confidential clerk left the room for the second time.

Wilson drew out his cigar case and lighted a cigar ; he then stretched himself back in his chair, and waited the arrival of his visitor. He had not to wait long, for within a couple of minutes of the announcement of the Captain's arrival, the Captain himself appeared,

"How do you do, Captain Dashleigh ?"

"How do you do, Mr. Wilson ?"

"Take a cigar ?"

"Thanks—you are very kind."

"You are looking pale and thin."

"You are right," said the Captain, lighting the cigar he had extracted from Wilson's store, and returning the case to its owner, "I am pale and thin, rather out of sorts, in fact ; but you seem to have prospered !"

"Yes," said Wilson, moving in his chair uncomfortably. "Yes, I have prospered ; and that remark of yours recalls me to myself. It would be absurd

for two hard-headed men of the world like you and me to beat about the bush a moment longer than necessary. Now, both of us know several ugly stories about the other, and, that being the case, it is as well that we should thoroughly understand if this is, or is not, a friendly meeting."

"Why should it be otherwise?"

"For many reasons, but one will be sufficient—that we have often crossed swords. But that is not the point."

"Pardon me for not replying to your question immediately. When I tell you that I come to borrow money, you will understand at once that my visit is of the most friendly character."

"Hum!" coughed Wilson, but the frown that had settled upon his brow relaxed, and his fierce white teeth showed themselves in a grim smile beneath his black moustache.

"I understand your bank—ha—ha—fancy your keeping a bank!—pardon me, the idea tickled me. I repeat, I understand that your bank lends money."

"Only to oblige our clients."

"Oh, of course, only to oblige your clients, that I quite understand. Well, imagine me one of your clients (I intend to become one), and oblige me."

"How much do you want?"

"I must have six hundred."

"Any security to offer?"

"Only my note of hand."

"That will make the matter more expensive. To clients who can give us good security, we charge merely a nominal rate of interest—about five-and-twenty per cent. You will be able to give us two securities?"

"No, not one."

"That will make the matter more expensive still. However, as you are an old friend, I suppose I must manage it for you. Will you oblige me by ringing that bell, thank you. Here, while I draw out an acceptance, will you sign this book?"

Dashleigh scribbled his signature as Wilson prepared a promissory note, at three months date. By the time that Mr. Poulson appeared, the bond had been signed and duly dried on a piece of blotting paper.

"Mr. Poulson," said Wilson, when his clerk entered the room, "Captain Dashleigh has become one of our constituents; you will be so good as to give him a cheque book as he leaves the bank. Take this bill for £700, and after deducting the ordinary charges, put the remainder to Captain Dashleigh's account; you understand me, Mr. Poulson."

"Certainly, sir," and the confidential clerk disappeared. "And how much is my account?" asked Dashleigh, when the door closed.

"Five hundred pounds," was Wilson's answer, as he puffed his cigar.

"By jove!" cried the Captain, "what has become of the other two hundred?"

"Oh, that, my dear fellow, is the bank's commission!"

The two men looked at one another for a couple of minutes, and then the Captain burst into a hearty laugh.

"Wilson," he said, "you were always a Jew!"

"My good fellow, I have lived a life of privation, and now that I am up in the tree the world shall pay for it!"

"Yes—that may be all very fine, but I wish you wouldn't consider me the world!"

"At any rate you are an excellent substitute for the flesh, and—you can supply the rest from the Church catechism. But there we need not bandy compliments. Let's come to business."

"Business! surely we have done with business for to-day."

"My good fellow," said Wilson, "you must have strangely forgotten my character if you believe that. We have known one another for many years, and in all that time I don't think you can remember one single occasion on which I have done a deliberately silly thing."

"For the sake of argument, granted. What next?"

"Had I given you six hundred pounds without better security than you offered me to-day, I should have done a very silly thing indeed—unless my view extended beyond that sum—in fact, unless I saw that you would be useful to me to the tune of thousands."

"What! Shylock—you are not satisfied—you want a pound and a half of flesh!"

"Don't call me Shylock—it is irritating and unfriendly. Besides, I am not a bit like the fool. I infinitely prefer cash to blood, and only take flesh when I can't get money."

"Well," said the Captain, "what do you want next?"

"First, my dear friend, it may be as well to explain our relative positions. You may guess that at the present moment I am rich."

"Yes, I may *guess* that, but there's nothing stable about you, Wilson."

"Take my word for it I am rich, but before I throw up this bank, I intend to be very much richer. I repeat, you may *guess* me to be rich, now I *know* you to be poor."

"Take my word for it I am poor, but before I throw up the bank I intend to be poorer."

"Very neatly turned, but we mustn't joke on serious matters; knowing you to be poor, I lend you £700 without security, what do you say to that?"

"In the first instance 'thank you'—in the second 'charitable but unbusiness like.'"

"Neither one nor the other. I lend £700 to have a hold over you. If you pay it, I get my proper interest, if you don't, why, it is in my power to ruin you."

"But you won't?"

"Of course not—if you do what I want; and now what do I want?"

"Ah! that's the question, isn't it?"

"You have not married since our last meeting?"

"No; I am still a happy bachelor."

"Do you mind marrying?"

"Oh, that's your game, is it? Ah I see some wicked old widow—ugly as sin, and rich as Cræsus! Eh!"

"On the contrary she is young, pretty, and innocent. Any amount of money at her father's death. Her father is a particular friend of mine."

"And as a favour to him, you want me to marry his daughter. You must be very fond of him. Any thing more?"

"Merely to ask you to sign this document. It's not very formidable."

Dashleigh read the paper, murmured "It doesn't bind me to much," and scribbled his signature.

"Thank you," said Wilson, carefully drying the ink on some blotting paper, "that will suit me very nicely. And now what are you doing with yourself to-morrow evening?"

"Nothing in particular—why do you ask?"

"Because if you have no better engagement, I shall be delighted to see you at dinner at my house in South Kensington—142 Norfolk Gardens—seven-thirty, sharp."

"Thanks very much, shall be delighted, I'm sure. But, pardon the question—Why this display of rather unusual hospitality?"

"Oh, I am always pleased to see a friend," replied Wilson, "besides, I may possibly be able to introduce you to your future father-in-law. Good-bye, mind 142 Norfolk Gardens, South Kensington, seven-thirty sharp."

When his visitor had gone, the banker folded the newly signed document, and endorsing it "Captain Dashleigh's account," placed it in the table beside the loaded revolver. This done, he locked the drawer and put the key in his pocket.

The document contained the following words:—

LONDON, 14th June, 187—

I promise to pay Henry Backhouse Wilson, the sum of Five Thousand Pounds (£5,000) on the day on which Fanny Mostyn, daughter of Jeremiah Mostyn, of Mostyn Manor, Cravington, Devonshire, becomes my wife.

(Signed)

CHARLES HOWARD DASHLEIGH.

CHAPTER V.

A FAMILY MATTER.

ON the day following his interview with Dashleigh, Wilson arrived rather earlier than usual at the bank. He was accustomed to rush up the staircase three steps at a pace, and then to hurry into his room. On this occasion he found it occupied. Seated before the table, and fumbling at the lock of the drawer, was Mr. Poulson, the confidential clerk.

"Good morning, sir," said the intruder, jumping up and colouring slightly. "I was looking to see if I had let any letters fall yesterday, sir, under the table."

"Very well, Poulson—if I find any, I will bring them to you."

"Thank you, sir, I have placed this morning's correspondence upon the table, as usual."

"Very good. By the way, I expect that gentleman who called so many times last month."

"Mr. Mostyn?"

"Yes, Mr. Mostyn. He wrote to me yesterday, telling me to expect him to-day. When he comes, be kind enough to send him in to me."

"Certainly, sir."

"Tampering with the lock," said Wilson, when he was alone. "That won't do at all, Mr. Poulson. The time may come when I shall have to dismiss my chief clerk. He evidently wishes to grow *too* confidential."

Having delivered himself of this sentence, Wilson opened the drawer, drew out the revolver, and carefully examined it. As usual (he had inspected the pistol every morning for days and weeks), he replaced it carefully. Next he produced a packet of bills, and glanced over them hurriedly.

"Yes, they look all right," he murmured. "And there, now, I think I am fully prepared for the visit of my friend."

He had not long to wait. After some ten minutes of expectation, Mr. Poulson re-entered, and announced the fact that Mr. Mostyn wanted to see him.

"My dear good friend," cried Wilson, jumping up, "I am delighted to see you. What have you been doing? Had I not received your letter, I should have imagined that you had quite forgotten me. Now that you are here—you are thrice welcome."

"Humph," grunted Mostyn, "as I suppose you want to be civil to me, I ought to say something amiable. Very well then—thank you."

After this gracious speech, Mr. Mostyn sat down and stared angrily at the Banker. Mr. Wilson stared at Mr. Mostyn,—at last he said,—

"There's something the matter with you. What is it? Has anything gone wrong?"

"No, sir, there's nothing wrong so far as I am concerned. But how about yourself—are you sure there's nothing wrong about you?"

This was a mere random shot of Mostyn's—when doing business he was wont to be suspicious, bearish, nay, absolutely rude. In spite of this, it seemed to affect Wilson strangely. The Banker started, bit his lip, and for a moment his hand rested on the drawer containing the loaded revolver. It was only for a moment, and then his fierce white teeth showed themselves under his black moustache in anything rather than a pleasant smile.

"I scarcely understand you," he said calmly, but firmly. "Perhaps you will make your meaning plainer."

A thorough cur at heart, Mr. Mostyn turned tail on seeing this determined front.

"Oh, nothing, nothing, I daresay it's all right."

"What is all right?" asked the Banker. "Pardon me, my dear Mr. Mostyn, but it is as well to have no misconceptions in matters of business. Now, from

your words you led me to believe that you imagined it possible that I could ever find my affairs in a state of embarrassment. Did you mean that?"

"Certainly not," cried Mostyn, "certainly not. The fact is, Wilson, (by the way, why don't you call me Mostyn, I drop the 'mister' with you), the fact is, I am bothered at home, and that makes me irritable."

"Irritability should never make a man talk nonsense in matters of business," said Wilson sententiously.

"Certainly, certainly," replied the now amiable Mostyn. "Certainly, Wilson. We weren't talking business before, you know, but now we will. And after we have done I want to have a little amiable chat about a family matter. You agree to that, Wilson?"

"Certainly, my dear Mr. Mostyn."

"Drop the 'mister' Wilson, or I shall feel that you are still offended with me. And now to business."

Wilson opened the drawer and produced the roll of bills that he had prepared in anticipation of his visitor's arrival. He gave them to Mostyn. "You will see that the total amounts to £10,780.—If you will give me a cheque for the £10,000, we can carry the hundreds odd over to our next account."

Mostyn's face fell. He put on his spectacles, (only used on occasions of great doubt and difficulty), and examined the bills closely.

"It's a large sum, Mr. Wilson," he faltered.

"The better for you—quite safe—and large interest. What can you want more?"

"Well,"—

"My dear sir," interrupted Wilson decisively, "I fear that your words at the beginning of this interview were prompted by some feeling stronger than mere passing irritation. Under those circumstances—"

"Don't say another word, Wilson," stammered Mostyn, again giving way before the Banker's rising anger. "I am only too glad to discount the bills for you. Yes, I see the total is correct. I will draw out a cheque before I leave. And now that's settled, let's leave business and come to the family matter. Are you willing to assist me?"

"Certainly, my dear sir, if I can. Pray state your case, and I promise to give you my best attention."

"Well," said Mostyn, "the plain facts of the case are these, you know that I have a daughter."

"Yes," said Wilson, looking at his visitor sharply, "I had the honour of being introduced to her on one occasion."

The occasion to which he alluded, was a meeting in the Drive some two months before, when the Mostyn family had met him seated in a mail phaeton behind two gigantic horses. The mother had been most amiable, but the daughter had clearly shown him, that she considered him an "awful creature." Wilson never forgave any one, and he had not forgiven Miss Fanny.

"Ah yes, to be sure, of course, we met in the Park. You must come down to Cravington some day, Wilson."

"My dear sir, nothing would give me greater pleasure, but I never leave London. I am tied to the bank—chained to the wheel."

"Well, well, every man knows his own business best. It's our loss, sir, our loss! Well, it's because I have a daughter that I am anxious about those who stay in my house."

"Very naturally."

"Now you may be sure, that I would take precious good care, that I would ask no one who wasn't desirable, if I were left to myself, but I am not left to myself. I am sorry to say, that Mrs. Mostyn has as much to do with it as I have myself, what do you say to that?"

"That Mrs. Mostyn is a lady whose discretion I should imagine was remarkable—her own choice of a husband for instance."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mostyn, "thank you very much. But if you don't mind we will drop compliments, and come to plain matter of fact. Mrs. Mostyn makes me ask people I don't know much about."

"I see her heart is better than her head in matters of that sort."

"You've hit it off to a nicety. Well, last year we met a young fellow at Lausanne. We became very intimate with him, and before we left, my wife insisted that I should ask him to come down to Cravington, when we returned to England. I did this as ungraciously as I could, and a week ago my wife received a letter from him saying that he was in town. To make a long story short, Mrs. M. forced me to invite him to Mostyn Manor, and he's there's now."

"Well, my dear sir, you have my sincere sympathy; I am a bachelor myself, but I can quite understand the feeling of responsibility you must experience as the father of so charming a daughter as Miss Mostyn. How can I assist you?"

"You know everybody in town, perhaps you may know something about my guest. You see if I had anything to go upon, however small, I might work him out of the place."

"What is his name?"

"Harold Harrington—he's a subaltern in the 125th Foot."

"Oh yes, I know all about him," said Wilson, "look here, should you recognise a signature of his if you saw it before you?"

"Yes, to be sure."

"Very well, then, I think I can show you one," and Wilson pulled open the drawer of the table, and produced a promissory note for £250—drawn a month before at three months date, signed "Harold Harrington."

"Strange," murmured Mostyn, "why didn't Wilson give me this to negotiate?"

"Well," said the Banker, returning the note to its place in the drawer, "what do you think of that?"

"It shows he's very reckless, but—"

"But yet, it's not enough to convince Mrs. Mostyn that he's an unfit companion for your daughter on the score that all young men are reckless. Quite so. Stay, I have an idea. A friend of mine is just the man to ask down to

Cravington—he would keep his eye upon young Harrington. I undertake to say, that he would worm out of him more secrets in a week, than you and I could manage to extract in a year. I would give him a hint. His name's Dashleigh—was a captain in the 204th."

"But I don't know him," said Mostyn.

"Oh, that's easily managed—if you have nothing better to do, come and take a chop with me at South Kensington, this evening at half-past seven. Dashleigh and one or two others will be there. Will you come?"

"With pleasure."

"And now that's settled, is there anything else?"

"No," replied Mostyn, doubtfully—he did not like to ask his host, the Banker, why Harrington's promissory note had not been handed over to him with the other bills to be discounted. "No, I think that's all."

"Very well, will you kindly give me the £10,000 draught. We have had rather a run upon the bank during the last few days, and I feel quite pleased to get in small sums. Every little helps, you know."

Mr. Mostyn took out his cheque book, filled in a cheque, handed it to Wilson, and, after promising to keep his appointment for the evening, left the room.

"First move for Captain Dashleigh," said the Banker, as he folded up the draught he had just received, and placed it in his pocket-book. "Young Harrington! If I had told him just all I knew, he would have considered that gallant young subaltern quite a catch. But I owe Miss Fanny Mostyn a grudge, which shall be paid by Captain Dashleigh, when that perfect specimen of a man about town hands me over £5,000 on his wedding day."

Wilson took up his hat, put on his gloves, and whistled up a call pipe to Mr. Poulson, in the clerk's office.

"Yes, sir," was the immediate reply.

"Oh, Mr. Poulson, I am going to the city. I shall not return to-day."

"Very good, sir."

Wilson, however, did not go to the city. On the contrary, he only went as far as a bank near Charing Cross. He entered the establishment, and paid Mostyn's cheque for £10,000 into his private account.

"I told my friend just now that the 'Steel and Loadstone' wanted small sums—quite so, but I want large ones."

He called a hansom, got into it, and told the driver to take him to the Regent's Park.

CHAPTER VI.

WILSON'S "CHOP."

NUMBER 142 Norfolk Gardens, South Kensington, was a very magnificent mansion. Some people (of course persons with a vulgar turn of mind) would have insisted it was merely a large house in a turning out of the Brompton Road

while others (naturally those who had attained to a higher degree of refinement) would have declared it a paradise within an easy stroll of Piccadilly. Be what it might in the estimation of others, it was certainly the pride and boast of its owner. Mr. Wilson had become possessed of it rather cleverly. Before commencing the purchase of the lease, he had arranged to mortgage that document to the value of the uttermost farthing. Thus he paid with one hand what he had received with the other. Having entered into possession, his first idea was to beautify his property. He ran stone balconies under all the windows, from the basement to the garrets, he put up staring red, yellow, and white awnings in front of the dining and drawing rooms, he stuccoed over the neat yellow brick of the frontage. Having thus "improved" the exterior, he turned his attention to the interior. He filled every room with furniture, without regard to size, taste, or requirement. So long as the articles he selected were costly and showy, he cared not where he placed them. Those who walked into his drawing-room (an apartment forty feet by thirty), tumbled over Dresden china vases, ormolu tables, old oaken chairs, rose wood lounges, and walnut sofas. Oil paintings, engravings, and water-colour drawings, were suspended to the walls in frames of all fashions, and of every size. In fact, the place looked like a badly arranged show-room, in an upholsterer's establishment in the Tottenham Court Road. Upon the staircase of 142 Norfolk Gardens (which was, of course, made of stone), appeared at about every third stair (on the average), a statue holding a lamp. A small conservatory, containing a very large fountain, broke the monotony of the steps, half way between the hall and the drawing-room. The bannisters were gold and silver, the wall paper embossed, the owner's monogram appeared in every direction. To sum up the establishment, in Mr. Wilson's own words, "the whole place was neat, and very handsome."

The first to arrive of those summoned to make merry over the Banker's chop, was "young De Lacy Home."

He was not particularly juvenile in appearance, having hair prematurely grey, and a beard and moustache which were as white as snow. He was called "young," in the first instance, to distinguish him from his father (a great celebrity of a past generation), and the adjective had been coupled with his name ever since, although his parent had been dead for years. Perhaps another reason for his soubriquet "young" may have been found in the fact that he was always beginning something new, he never grew old in any service. At the age of thirty, he had started, edited and buried some half dozen London papers, written any number of three volume novels, and produced several three act plays. His friends, and he had many, regarded his career as a dead failure, and they were to a certain extent right. Before he was one and twenty he edited a journal of "fearless criticism," and in six months contrived to make for himself enough personal enemies to last three ordinary men a lifetime. Added to this he had a restlessness of disposition that would never permit him to retain any berth for more than a year at the most. He flew from post to post as an acrobat on the trapeze flies from bar to bar. He had met Wilson while engaged in projecting

some wild enterprise or other, and had accepted the Banker's invitation, not because he liked him, but because he thought it necessary to be civil to all capitalists. "They may turn out useful some day," he would say, and yet the capitalists had never been particularly useful to poor young De Lacy. Mr. Home was as hard working as a dray horse, and as poor as a Low-Church mouse. Ushered into the drawing-room by a gorgeous footman in a splendid livery, the promoter deposited himself in an armchair, and yawned. He was tired to death, and wishing in his heart of hearts Mr. Wilson and his "chop" at the bottom of the Dead Sea.

"Hallo, De Lacy, is that you, old man," said a new comer, entering the room.

"What, Dashleigh! this is jolly. I had a vague notion that our host knew nobody. I beg your pardon—perhaps he's a friend of yours?"

"Not in the least. Fire away, old man. Whatever we may say of Wilson no doubt will be punished by his champagne."

"My dear fellow, I never touch champagne. The fact is I have to dine in so many strange places, with so many strange people, that I cannot afford to ruin my constitution and digestion by the enforced consumption of gooseberry. I consulted my doctor, and he absolutely forbids me to take any champagne—except at the Club."

"What are you doing now?"

"Oh, I have really got hold of a first-rate thing at last, which must lead to a fortune."

As it was a habit of poor "young Home" to get hold of first-rate things, that generally led no nearer to a fortune than the Court of Bankruptcy, his friend did not seem particularly elated.

"I give you my word, Dashleigh, it's really first-rate. I am starting a new Club. I feel I am a bore, old fellow. But the fact is when I take hold of a thing, I get so interested in it that I can't give it up. Just now, my one idea is to get a respectable committee together."

"Why don't you ask our host to lend you his name?"

"Don't chaff; by-the-bye, who is Wilson?"

"Very much the same sort of fellow as you, my boy—from a business point of view, of course. The only difference between you is this—what you take in hand makes the fortune of others, at the cost of your ruin—what he takes in hand makes his own fortune at the cost of the ruin of others. He has been everything at one time or another, except a gentleman."

"And we are going to eat his dinner after——"

"Abusing him like a pick-pocket. Quite so, my dear fellow, do we not live in a free country?"

De Lacy laughed. "Well," he said, "after all, he wouldn't have asked us if he hadn't wanted to make use of us in some way or other. So we needn't waste our gratitude upon him."

"Gratitude," replied Dashleigh, "that's a word our friend Wilson has never understood. And if it comes to that, he's certainly in the fashion."

Their conversation was interrupted at this point by the arrival of their host. Wilson was very gorgeously attired. His black waistcoat (he wore a red one beneath it) was cut so low, that only one button was necessary to keep it closed. His shirt was elaborately embroidered and adorned with a huge solitaire of diamonds. His collar seemed only to be a few sizes smaller than that generally worn by the gentleman who plays the tambourine at the Moore and Burgess Minstrels. He wore no neck-tie, probably with a view to the better exhibition of his ruby and emerald collar button. His coat was garnished with velvet and satin, his trousers were striped with broad braid, and his boots were sticky with polish and creaky with novelty.

"My dear fellows, I am delighted to see you," said he, shaking his guests by the hand. "Ah, Home, I hear you are getting up a new Club. You may put me on the Committee if you like."

"My dear fellow," replied De Lacy, reddening, "I am sure I should be most charmed, but the fact is, I haven't much to do with the affair—I mean not very much."

"Oh, just as you please. Of course I know it wouldn't last very long, but if I must throw away an entrance fee, and a year's subscription anywhere, I might throw it away to you, you know, as to any one else."

"Oh thanks, very much," said Home uncomfortably, "I hope it will last. I am sure I think it will, or I would not ask a fellow to join it, of course, but—"

"If Wilson gives you the names of some of his other Clubs," put in Dashleigh, wishing to help De Lacy out of the difficulty, "surely you might do something about it, eh?"

"Oh, yes," said Home, eagerly, "that would be all right. What are your clubs, eh, Wilson?"

"Well," stammered the Banker, "strange to say I don't belong to any yet, but I am going to be put up for the Reform, the Athenæum, White's and the Windham."

"Oh, any one of those will do admirably," said Home. "So when you are elected, old man, give me the name of the Club, and I will see to it at once."

"All right," replied Wilson, pulling at his moustache angrily, "you may expect to get my application in a fortnight. It's a pity that the laws of your club won't admit me earlier, as I might have been useful."

"It is a pity," admitted poor De Lacy, conscious of having made Wilson his enemy for life, and the subject dropped. There was an awkward pause, when the footman in gorgeous livery threw open the door and announced "Mr. Mostyn." Wilson introduced the new comer to his other guests, and the party being now complete, the quartette proceeded to the dining-room. Mostyn was very silent during the soup, but as the wine circulated, his tongue was loosened and he began to talk with the greatest possible freedom. He was loud in praise of himself, and his industry. He explained how with half-a-crown he had realised a fortune. Young Home, who had at first been rather disgusted with the vulgarity of his neighbour, gradually grew impressed, and soon classed him in the list of

his "possible capitalists." He "thought out" several schemes to propose to Mostyn, with the walnuts, which were to make a fortune for both of them. However, Mostyn on being "drawn out," showed such a decided aversion to advancing twenty guineas to anybody or for anything without a guaranteed security, often ten times that value, that poor young Home soon relapsed into silence.

The dinner was bad and expensive. The soup quarrelled with the fish, and the entrées refused to have anything to do with the bird. First there was a run of white dishes to be followed with several courses of brown. In fact it was a repast that could only have been ordered by a man with more money than taste, and with a greater amount of vulgarity than both put together. After the disappearance of young Home from the conversation, Dashleigh took up the running, and made himself vastly agreeable to Mostyn.

"You must come down and see my place, captain," said the self-made man. "It's as nice a bit of ground as you could find between here and anywhere."

"Shall be delighted, I am sure," replied Dashleigh. "From your description, I feel quite certain it must be an earthly paradise."

"Well, it ain't quite that," retorted Mostyn, under the impression that his new friend was quizzing him, "but it's good enough for me, and what's good enough for me, is good enough for any one, ain't it?"

"I should think it was," replied Wilson, answering for Dashleigh, who seemed rather surprised at Mostyn's irritability. "I am quite sure the Captain will be delighted to come, and I would come, too, had I the time and——"

"If Mrs. Mostyn would let you," interrupted the self made man with a vulgar laugh. "Eh, Wilson?"

The banker winced, and gave a glance at Home, meant to suggest that he pardoned Mr. Mostyn, because he knew that champagne, mixed with sherry and claret, was prone to cause intoxication.

"Well, when will you come?" asked Mostyn, turning round to Dashleigh.

"To-morrow, if you please," said the captain with some reluctance.

The purpose for which the dinner had been given, having now been satisfactorily attained, Wilson made no further effort to retain the company of his guests. The party soon broke up.

"I congratulate you upon the first step to your wedding cake," said Wilson to Dashleigh as they parted.

"I say, I don't half care about this matter, it will cost a lot of trouble, and bore me awfully. Supposing I throw the affair up? What then?"

"I never talk business in my private house," replied the Banker calmly. "Do as you please, but I warn you I never hesitate to be business like when I am in my office. Please yourself. I have no doubt you will find Whitecross Street very much pleasanter than Mostyn Manor, if you choose to go there, and now good night."

"Good night."

PART II.—COUNTERPLOT.

CHAPTER I.

THE COUNTESS DONATO IS INTRODUCED TO CAPTAIN DASHLEIGH.

JEREMIAH MOSTYN, Esq. of Mostyn Manor, was holding high revel on the lands of his adoption. According to the local paper he "was entertaining a distinguished circle," and garden party followed grand dinner, and grand dinner garden party. The guests of Mr. Mostyn, to tell the truth, as a general rule, were more numerous than select. The county, in a body, refused to have anything to do with him. On their arrival in Devonshire Mr. and Mrs. Mostyn had driven in great state to the neighbouring seats to leave cards. The cards had been left, but had never been returned. Mr. Mostyn, who until then had been distinctly Conservative in his political principles, suddenly changed sides and announced himself a Radical. This move had some effect, and anglers after Tory votes began to tolerate him. Lord Arthur Mudville, for instance, sought and obtained his acquaintance, and paid him no little attention. Lord Arthur was a cheery young man, who, during a career of some ten years (the time he had been released from leading-strings), had managed to more or less distinguish himself as a barrister, a journalist, and a playwright. When Mostyn appeared upon the scene he was "going in fiercely" for politics, and consequently Mostyn was taken up, and wheedled with a view to obtaining for the Tory party in Devonshire a fresh accession of strength. Lord Arthur had soon found out Mostyn's weak point, and had promised to bring his brother, the Marquis of Ditchwater, to a Mostyn Manor garden party. On the announcement of this intention the following conversation took place.

"I must say, my lord," said Mostyn, "that it would be most gratifying to my feelings. After all, haven't we a history of England, and ain't the old names honourable? It will certainly be a proud day for me when I welcome to my abode the most noble the Marquis of Ditchwater."

"Don't tell my brother that," replied Lord Arthur, with a laugh, "or you will make him shy. He's an awfully nervous fellow."

"Nervous my lord—a marquis nervous! impossible," and then he added, believing that his guest was chaffing him, "but mind you, in spite of what I say about the History of England, I am an out and out Radical."

"Doubtless, doubtless, Mr. Mostyn," returned Lord Arthur, "but after you

have been a landed proprietor a little longer, I think you will see reason to change your opinions. Why, my dear sir, you belong to us."

Lord Arthur spoke with the air of one who owned thousands of acres, regardless of the fact that his present prospects were bounded on one side of St. James's Street, by a set of chambers on the third floor, and on the other by an account at a bank, mainly composed of the allowance remitted to him by his elder brother. Mostyn, greatly gratified at the compliment, said nothing, but shook his head doubtfully, as if he were in the act of considering whether he should "pronounce" (as the Spaniards have it,) for "Queen and Country," or "the International Rights of Man."

"Come, now, Mr. Mostyn, if you like to fix Thursday for a garden party, I will not only come, but I will bring my brother with me."

"Will you, indeed, my lord," cried Mostyn, his eyes glistening with pleasure, and then he "pronounced" for "Queen and Country" in the following words, "As you say property has not only rights but duties. I, as a landed proprietor, shan't forget that at the hustings, my lord."

And so it was arranged that at least on one occasion the company at the Manor were to be more select than numerous. Lord Arthur, in an airy, amiable manner, went through Mrs. Mostyn's list, and cut out a number of names. The local clergyman, doctors, and solicitors were to be asked, and the line was to be drawn somewhere about the local architect.

"But how shall we fill up their places, my lord?" asked Mrs. Mostyn, "you see we don't care to know many of the families living about here."

A statement which was not quite true, as it was the families who did not care to know her. However, Lord Arthur allowed the little discrepancy to pass unnoticed, and replied, "My dear Mrs. Mostyn, if you will give me leave I will make good the deficiency. I belong to a jolly little club in town, filled with the nicest fellows imaginable—authors, actors, artists. I will try to persuade some of them to pay you a visit, they are the best natured men in the world, and I am sure that if I really make a point of it, they will consent to come. And now have I seen all your cards?"

"All except this, it was left yesterday."

"What," exclaimed Lord Arthur, in surprise, "the Countess Donato? Why, do you know her?"

"We do now, it appears," returned Mrs. Mostyn, "she has been a long time settling whether she should return our cards. But it's all right now, at last she has made what Fanny calls in French, the *amende*."

Lord Arthur thought to himself, "The countess has some object in view in making this call I wonder what it is? An unforgiving woman, the countess."

"Shall we ask her?" said Mrs. Mostyn, throwing the countess's card back into the basket."

"Certainly, Mrs. Mostyn, certainly. She's rather eccentric, it is true; but London has pardoned her and made her the rage."

And so a card for Mrs. Mostyn's garden party was forthwith dispatched to the countess.

Captain Dashleigh had been in residence, something like a fortnight, at Mostyn Manor, when the day of the entertainment arrived. He had lost no time in making himself agreeable to Miss Fanny, who received his flattery and attentions with no little satisfaction. The young lady taking a hint from the diplomacy of Queen Elizabeth, played one courtier against the other, now appearing to favour Harold Harrington, now seeming to smile upon Captain Dashleigh. This particularly feminine line of conduct did not increase the feeling of friendship that should have existed between the two men. On the contrary, Harold hated Dashleigh rather worse than poison, and Dashleigh never spoke of Harold, except in a tone of the most pitying contempt. Fanny Mostyn laughed heartily at the outcome of her conduct, laughing *with* the Captain, and *at* the subaltern. Dashleigh felt that years at forty have some advantage. Harrington was much younger than his rival, but then what the Captain lacked in youth, he more than made up for in experience.

"And so we are to have an exceptionally large party to-day, Miss Mostyn," said Dashleigh, as he walked by the side of Fanny on the grass sacred to lawn tennis.

"I should rather think we were," replied his companion. "Mamma's in the seventh heaven of delight. Lord Arthur Mudville is going to bring his brother, the Marquis—only think of that!"

"I know," returned Dashleigh with a smile, "your papa told me all about it, at dinner last night, after you had gone up into the drawing-room. According to him, the visit is to be quite a historical affair—worthy of the Crusades, and all that sort of thing."

"You must not laugh at my papa," said Fanny gravely, and with a slight blush, "he is a nice, good, dear fellow, and means very well."

"Laugh at him!" exclaimed Dashleigh, "on the contrary, I agreed with him. The visit *would* be most interesting from a historical point of view—if Ditchwater wasn't such a donkey."

"Why, do you know the Marquis?"

"Oh, everybody in town does more or less, I suppose. All the wits of the family are centred in Arthur Mudville. Poor Ditchwater is very nearly an idiot. He can scarcely spell his name, and spends the greater part of his time in catching butterflies. The only clever thing he has ever done has been a negative. He has been clever enough to escape matrimony in spite of the snares laid in his way by hosts of managing mammas on the look-out for eligible sons-in-law."

"And do you consider matrimony such a very terrible affair, Captain Dashleigh?" asked Fanny with a smile.

"Yes, I do. Fancy the responsibility. To have in one's hands the future of a trusting girl. To know that upon you depends the happiness of a life much dearer to you than your own. If I ever get any one to marry me, I should feel that I must become a slave, I should feel—"

"That you must give up all your clubs and bachelor ways. Yes, I know, and that would be far too great a sacrifice, wouldn't it, Captain Dashleigh? But there, don't let us talk any more nonsense. The guests are arriving, and I must go and welcome them."

"Oh pray, don't go," said Dashleigh, who had by this time accompanied his companion to a more secluded part of the grounds than the lawn. "Surely your mamma can do the honours. I know when you go away, I shan't see you again for hours. You will be playing tennis, or chatting with your female friends about the mysteries of ladies' dress. Don't be cruel. Tell me who are coming."

"Oh, lots of people," replied Fanny. "The usual sort, don't you know? The kind of people everybody meets, don't you know?"

"Yes, I suppose so. The middle-aged boarding-school miss, who has married and thinks it rather the thing, to flirt with somebody else's husband."

"Oh you cruel man! You must mean Mrs. Moth, the daughter of the solicitor who married—"

"No, no, I don't mean anyone in particular, but that sort of thing is rather the fashion, just now, especially in the provinces. Mild naughtiness of the toast-and-water order of architecture! Then I suppose you will have some curates in moustaches, and perhaps a rural dean, a few men from the barracks, and Arthur Mudville's detachment. Surely you can give up the charms of all this pleasant society for a quiet chat with me. You can't imagine how delightful it is to me to hear you talk. Before I met you—"

"Yes, yes," replied Fanny, interrupting him, "I know, before you met me, you had no idea what a bore the country would be to a thorough town man. But you have done our guests injustice. Granted we have the usual number of insipid nobodies, we have one celebrity."

"You surely don't mean poor Ditchwater?"

"Oh, no, from your description I imagine he must be about the form of Mrs. Moth's admirers. Fat, short, and generally heavy."

"Quite so. Just the man for a hereditary legislator. He spends his time in the House, in sleeping and voting. But who is the celebrity? I am anxious to hear about the great man. Probably I have met him. Lions are at a premium."

"It isn't a man at all," returned Fanny, "it's a lady."

"Surely not one of the many professional beauties? I thought they were all abroad."

"Oh dear, no, although she is certainly wonderfully handsome. The Countess has other claims for celebrity."

"A Countess? And what has she done?"

"She is an Englishwoman by birth, the widow of an Italian Count, who died for his country."

"How very good of him. I trust that his wife appreciated his politeness. Very considerate, indeed."

"She shared her husband's fortunes. She followed him in his campaigns, and it is said, actually fought by his side."

"Dear me, what an alarming person. I must take care not to offend her or she will be calling me out before breakfast, and shooting me prior to drinking her matutinal cup of coffee."

"Many a serious truth is spoken in jest," replied Fanny gravely. "There is no one in the world I would dread more in a quarrel, than the Countess Donato."

"You quite pique my curiosity. And I suppose to make her more interesting than ever, she is as poor as a Church mouse."

"On the contrary, she is enormously rich. On the success of the Italian arms, her husband's fortune was restored to her."

"Dear me, a sort of Countess of Monte Christo. What a pity poor Alexandre Dumas *pere* didn't meet her—she might have furnished him with a subject for another romance. And when shall we see her?"

"Immediately," replied Fanny, "Mr. Harrington is leading her towards us."

"Does she know that particularly interesting youth?"

"Yes. He told me that he had met her when he was quartered at Malta."

"I hope you have warned him not to offend her. It would be so terribly embarrassing were he to ask me to be his second. Fancy going out on Ostend sands with one of the principals a lady!"

"Hush, here they come."

Captain Dashleigh and Fanny stood still to allow the approaching figures to come near them. The footsteps upon the gravel path grew louder and more distinct, and then Harrington, leading a lady, stood before them.

"My dear Countess," said Fanny, "I am so charmed to see you. And now, will you allow me to introduce—" She paused and turned round.

She started in astonishment. Captain Dashleigh, trembling with terror, was supporting himself by a tree. His eyes were starting from his head, his quivering lips were blue, and his face was as pale as death.

The Countess regarded him without any sign of emotion. At last he spoke, "Alice," he gasped out, in an unearthly voice, "do we meet again?"

Then he fell heavily to the ground in a dead faint.

CHAPTER II.

A LOVE AFFAIR.

THE fainting fit of Captain Dashleigh produced a sensation. All the guests assembled to do honour to the Mostyn Manor garden party, hurried to the place where the man of the world had fallen. They crowded round him until the local doctor insisted upon an open being preserved in the neighbourhood of the prostrate form.

"How can he breathe if you do not give him air?" asked the fussy little doctor, loosening his patient's neck-tie. "The gentleman is seriously ill."

Dashleigh groaned and shortly opened his eyes. "Where is she?" he murmured, "why has the grave given up its dead?"

"A very serious case indeed," observed the little doctor, turning pompously round, and addressing the by-standers, "a very serious matter—we must carry him into the house."

By this time Dashleigh had recovered his self-possession. Having assured himself by a rapid glance that the person whom he feared to meet had disappeared, he rose from the ground with the assistance of some of the by-standers.

"I really must apologise to you all for my absurd sensibility. The fact is, I have been taxing my strength lately a little unjustly. I have not been myself for a long time."

"My dear sir," said the fussy little doctor, "I assure you you make too light of your illness. Pray, rest upon my arm and try to walk."

"Thank you very much, but really I am all right again, I think it was the heat of the weather."

"You will come," urged Fanny, "I am sure the doctor is right."

"I suppose I must obey superior orders," said Dashleigh, "and as I certainly do feel rather weak, I won't refuse your arm, doctor, if you like to offer it to me."

The little general practitioner was only too pleased to assist, and walking slowly, the two men reached the Manor House. On his way, the captain talked about a sunstroke he had had in India, and attempted to persuade his companion that the cause of his fainting fit was a return of his old malady. The doctor politely bowed his head, but otherwise held his peace. At length the house was reached, and in a very short time the patient was installed in his bedroom, under the superintendence of the local Esculapius.

On returning to the grounds, the doctor was met by Fanny Mostyn, who eagerly asked after the patient.

"My dear young lady, mark my words, Captain Dashleigh is in for a serious illness. His fainting fit is not the end, but the beginning of a crisis."

And the prophecy of the doctor was verified by after events. The captain did not rise from his bed, for many a day after the garden party.

In the meanwhile, the cause of all this commotion had quietly withdrawn from the scene, still escorted by Harold Harrington. She had seen Dashleigh turn white and pale, without showing the slightest emotion. Perhaps her thin lips were rather more compressed, her lustrous black eyes were rather more lustrous after the encounter than before, but beyond this, there was nothing to show that she had the slightest feeling in the matter. She merely walked away, motioning to Harold to accompany her.

"But should he require my assistance?" said her companion, "can I not go to help him?"

"By all means, if you please, but he will get on very well without you."

"But should he be dead?"

"Well," answered the Countess with the most perfect *sang froid*. "Suppose him to be dead, *et apres?*"

There was such concentrated bitterness and hatred in these words, that Harold unconsciously shuddered.

"You do not like him?"

"Do you?"

"No," he answered, "not that he's a bad fellow. He's nobody's enemy but his own. So everybody says."

"Everybody says so?" she echoed, with a slight stress upon the first word of the sentence.

"Well, you know what I mean—it is the opinion of nine men out of ten. And yet I certainly do not care for him. There's something about him that—but there, it is unfair to abuse him."

"You are more generous to him than he is to you. When does he ever spare you? Why, he is always taunting and langhing at you."

"You know this!" exclaimed Harold in astonishment. "Why, this is the first time you have met. How have you learned this?"

"I know many things," replied the Countess, "but there would be no difficulty in making this discovery, considering that he generally laughs at you in the presence of Fanny Mostyn."

"Did she tell you this?" cried Harold angrily.

"My dear Mr. Harrington, you have met a phenomenon—a woman who can keep her own counsel. Pray admire me. Suffice it to say that I know that Captain Dashleigh does his best to make you appear ridiculous in the eyes of the daughter of this house, and (I am sure you will pardon my frankness), that his efforts are frequently crowned with success."

Harold said nothing, but the expression of his countenance was anything rather than amiable.

"And now," continued the Countess, "I will release you. See, there is Fanny Mostyn. Now that Captain Dashleigh is away, you can safely talk to her—without appearing ridiculous!"

Released by these words from attendance upon his companion, Harold hastened towards Fanny. He bit his lip as he noticed that her cheek was pale, and her eyes troubled.

"And how is our gallant warrior now?" he asked, with an uneasy laugh.

"If you mean Captain Dashleigh—he is seriously ill."

"For so old a campaigner, very little knocks him up."

They were walking side by side down a garden path shaded by large-spreading trees.

"I came here to get away from all the guests," said Fanny. "I have a dreadful headache—I only want to be alone."

"Is that a hint to me?"

Fanny was silent. Harold turned sharply round and was about to leave her, then he changed his mind.

"I have something to say to you, Miss Mostyn," he began.

She cut him short. "You are very good, but perhaps under the circumstances we can defer our conversation. You are sufficiently old a campaigner to understand what I mean. Now please do leave me."

Harold bit his lip till the blood came. He turned fiercely round, looked her straight in the face, and asked,

"Do you care for this man?"

"What man?"

"This man you have just left, this man about town, this Captain Dashleigh?"

"Mr. Harrington, you forget yourself. Remember that you are speaking of one of my father's guests."

"You have not answered my question."

"What right have you to ask it?"

"By the right of one who loves you with all his heart and soul."

He spoke slowly and earnestly, he took both her hands within his own, and gazed steadily into her eyes.

"Don't speak yet," he said, "hear all I have to say. Why are you so cold to me, why do you treat me like a dog? Before this man came here you made me hope that you were learning to love me, as Heaven help me! you have taught me to love you! Now all is changed. You avoid my society, and when we do meet, you make me feel that I am merely a plaything, a butt at which the shafts of ridicule may be safely cast. Yes, and even now you are smiling! Laugh away, but I tell you my heart is breaking!" And he unclasped her fingers hurriedly, and buried his face in his hands.

"You know you have no right to speak to me like this," she answered, with an assumption of anger, but as she looked at his evident emotion, her eyes grew dim and her lips quivered.

"No right! Have you forgotten the happy days we past at Ouchy? Have you forgotten your promises? You told me then that there was hope for me. You told me that if I came to you in a year you would listen to me, knowing that what I would have to say to you would affect our future lives, knowing that I would come to you to ask you to be my wife."

"Well, what have you to complain of? I am here listening to you now. How have I broken my promise?"

He seized her hands once more, and looking her in the face with an expression of sorrowful eagerness, said, "Will you be my wife?"

She hesitated and turned away her head.

"I am answered," he cried bitterly, casting away her hands. "Why did I come here? I might have guessed the result, and I have tried so hard to please you. There is not a word that you have spoken that has not sunk deeply into my heart. You complained that I was shy and unlike other men. Since we parted I have changed my mode of life. To please you, I have gone in for cards, races, supper parties. I have tried to be as thoughtless and light-hearted as other men. To please you. What a fool I have been. Now laugh at me for my pains."

He turned away from her. She touched him gently on the arm, and said, "You have not heard my answer."

He looked at her once again, and for a moment the light of hope fluttered in his eyes.

"Harold dear, you must not be angry with me. It is not my fault. I do verily believe that I am acting in a dream. I scarcely know what I am doing. I longed for our meeting, I counted the days that separated you from me, and had you said what you have just spoken to me when we first met, I could have given you but one answer. But now I ask you to let me have time, I want to wake out of my trance, to become myself once more." She spoke earnestly, and with tears in her eyes.

"You have allowed this man to come between us, do you love him?"

"No, a thousand times no," she cried. "Be generous, Harold, give me time. I feel numbed as if some subtle influence of evil surrounded me. When he is near me I am insensibly drawn towards him, against the dictates of my own heart, my conscience, my reason. When he is away I feel how infinitely dearer you are to me than he is, but I also feel that until I have escaped from his influence, I am unworthy of you, that I must not listen to you when you talk to me of love. Remember that I am but a girl, I am dazzled, confused, leave me until I come to my senses."

"But do you know who this man is? Do you not know that he is a gambler—a *roué*?"

"My heart tells me so. And yet——"

"Escape from this miserable bondage. Promise to be my wife, and I shall have a right to guard you. Don't sport with your future happiness any longer." And once again he took her hands.

Before she could answer him there was a rustling in the trees, and Amy Lawson appeared before them.

"Fanny darling, I have been looking for you everywhere. The doctor says he must see you about Captain Dashleigh, to give you instructions. The poor fellow is frightfully ill and must be nursed. He wants us to nurse him until a proper attendant can be obtained, and now, Mr. Harrington, I am sure you will excuse us."

Before he could reply, Harold found himself alone. He saw the two girls in the distance hurrying towards the house. He sat down on a rustic seat and fell into a brown study. When he looked up the Countess Donato was standing before him.

"I am glad to have found you," she said, "Captain Dashleigh's illness has caused an abrupt termination to be put to the garden party, and the people are hurrying away from the house as if it contained the plague. Before I go I want to say a few words to you."

He regarded her wearily, and bowed his head.

"Now I can tell you what has happened since I last saw you. You have been speaking to Fanny Mostyn and have found that a rival has placed himself between you and her. You are thinking now, and have been thinking ever since Fanny left you, that you would give worlds to remove that rival from your path. Well, I have come to help you."

"You?"

"Yes. I don't pretend for a moment that the offer of my help is disinterested. We both have our own reasons for hating this man, but our end is the same. You wish to thwart him in every scheme, so do I? Let us work together."

"But how?"

"I will tell you later. Come to my house to-morrow morning, and we will consult together. By that time I shall have matured my plans. And now all you have to do, is to make yourself more than usually amiable to Fanny while he is away."

"The doctor wishes her to nurse him."

"To nurse him!" cried the countess. "Then is his illness really serious?"

"So serious that his life is despaired of."

The countess turned pale. She bit her lips in anger, and clenched her hands.

"It shall not be!" she murmured, "after all this weary waiting, at this moment of triumph, it shall not be."

"You are ill," said Harold.

"No, no," she replied, with her hand to her heart, "I must not die yet. I will not die yet. Listen, be with me to-morrow at twelve. And now I must hurry to the telegraph office to send a message to the best doctor that London contains. The local practitioner might make a mistake, I cannot trust him."

"Telegraphing to the doctor. Then you *are* ill, seriously ill."

"I am always ill, my life is not worth a year's purchase. I am suffering from a fatal malady that must carry me off. But I am not thinking of myself, I *am* thinking of him, he must be saved."

"Of whom do you speak?"

"Captain Dashleigh."

"You would save Captain Dashleigh?" exclaimed Harold. "Why, have you not told me that you wish to ruin him, and yet you would save his life?"

"And yet I would save his life. Come to me to-morrow at twelve, and we will mature our plans. In the meanwhile do not think I am showing Dashleigh any mercy by attempting to save his life. Far from it. Listen Mr. Harrington. I hate Captain Dashleigh so deeply that I will not let him die—yet!"

CHAPTER III.

THE COUNTESS LAYS HER PLANS.

Two days after the garden party at Mostyn Manor, a carriage drove up to the house of one of the most fashionable doctors in town, and set down a lady at the door.

"Can I see your master?" she asked, when the confidential servant appeared

"Have you an appointment, madame?"

"No, but I would esteem it a favour if I could see the doctor at once."

"I am afraid you will have to wait your turn, but fortunately, to-day, there are not many patients. Town is very empty."

With this the lady was ushered into a large sitting-room, elegantly furnished, and well supplied with the periodicals of the day. There were but two visitors. The first a fat, red-faced old woman, wearing the most gorgeous apparel, the other, a poor pale-faced girl, clad in the homeliest of garments. After a pause the door was opened, and the richer and more elderly patient was called out. Her case occupied the doctor exactly five minutes. Then it came the turn of the poor girl. It was nearly an hour before the last visitor was summoned. As the lady entered the consulting-room the poor girl was leaving it.

"No, no," said the doctor, pushing aside the hand that contained something wrapped up in white paper, "we use our discretion in these matters, good morning."

The poor girl was stopped in the utterance of her thanks by the doctor closing the door, and motioning the new comer to take a seat.

"The Countess Donato," said he, reading a card before him. "I need scarcely tell you, madam, that your name is very familiar to me. I am sorry you should have occasion for my services."

"I will not take up your valuable time for very long," replied the countess, "I know my case is a hopeless one."

"Pardon me, nothing is hopeless."

"You will be better able to judge when I tell you my malady."

The doctor listened to what she said to him, and his face grew graver and graver as she spoke.

"I have seen the most famous doctors in London, and they tell me that nothing can save me." She said in conclusion, "When the heart is affected, all hope is gone."

"The most famous doctors are frequently wrong," said the physician, with a smile. "Not that I wish in any way to detract from the fame of my *confrères*. Still, with your permission, I would like to test your heart myself."

She bowed acquiescence. She was the first to speak.

"Well, and what do you think?"

"That my colleagues were perfectly right," he replied, gravely. "I know that you are a brave woman, and therefore I do not shrink from telling you that your days are numbered."

She smiled and said, "I would not wish it otherwise. This world is not such a very happy one that I should wish to stay in it so very much longer. The last doctor told me that I should not live more than three months."

"He could not possibly have fixed a limit. Without excitement your life might be prolonged for a year—perhaps two years."

"You know my name, and yet you suggest that I could live without excitement."

"Your fate is in your own hands, madam," returned the doctor, dryly. "Doubtless you have received full directions at the hands of my colleagues. If you do not attend to their advice, your life be upon your own head."

"Good," she said, "I only wished to have your opinion too, they all tell me that I am killing myself."

"They are right."

"They all advise me, quiet, rest, peace. Peace!" she cried, with a bitter laugh, "as if a woman such as I could ever know peace!"

"I am deeply sorry," said the doctor, rising, "that I can be of no farther use. Your case is in your own hands. The malady is a fatal one, it depends upon you, and you alone, whether you die at once or live till nature exhausts herself."

"The Countess bowed, and left the room. When she regained her carriage, she murmured,

"I am killing myself. They all say the same, and shrug their shoulders when I tell them I cannot help it. Well, if I must kill myself, why should I not choose my own death? The crime will not be greater, no the crime will not be greater."

The carriage passed through the streets, and soon found itself in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross. It ultimately stopped in front of the Steel and Loadstone Bank. The Countess Donato descended, and was soon ushered into the presence of Mr. Wilson. The Banker received her with a profusion of bows, and offered her a chair.

"Doubtless, madam, you wish to become one of our constituents. Mr. Poulson, will you be good enough to have the signature-book in readiness?"

"Certainly, sir," and upon the withdrawal of the clerk, the Banker and his visitor were left together.

"May I be permitted to ask," continued Wilson, addressing the Countess, "who was kind enough to recommend the Bank to you?"

"It has been mentioned to me by Mr. Harold Harrington. We were speaking about it yesterday."

On hearing this the face of the Banker fell. Still he made a brave fight.

"Doubtless Mr. Harrington has informed you that this Bank is founded upon the soundest of mercantile principles. That its Reserve Fund (although comparatively small), is invested in the safest possible manner that—

The Countess waved her hand.

"Pray let me save you the trouble of recounting the advantages of the institution. Mr. Harrington gave me the worst possible account of the Bank. He described it to be on the brink of insolvency."

"He shall pay for this," cried Wilson in a fury. "Why, madam, it's a gross libel, and you are guilty of slander in repeating it. You shall say it again in the presence of my chief clerk, and then the solicitors of the Bank shall be communicated with! Here, Mr. Poulson, come this way."

"You need not trouble Mr. Poulson. What I have to say affects yourself, not the Bank. Pray be calm and reasonable. I have nothing to lose. I am not one of your constituents. What does it matter whether your Bank succeeds or fails—to me? Wait until you have heard all I have to say. You may be sure that I did not come into this room with merely the purpose of wantonly insulting you. Be reasonable."

Wilson still paused, but he motioned to Poulson (who showed a strong inclination to enter the room to make discoveries), not to leave his place in the clerk's office. After a while he spoke,

“You say that you did not come here with the purpose of insulting me, and yet you *have* insulted me. On my word, madam, I don’t understand you.”

“You soon will. I thought it better to let you know that I had received some particulars about you.”

“Derived from Mr. Harrington?”

“Well, yes, although it really matters very little who was the source of my information. Suffice it to say, that I know if I offer you good terms to do me a service, you will not call my proposition an insult.”

“Surely you might have done that without casting reflections upon the Bank?”

“Not quite—I have to speak confidentially to you, and I want you in return to speak confidentially to me. Now I know that it is a part of your business to discount the bills of young men.”

“Well, other banks do the same.”

“But they show some discretion in the choice of their customers.”

“I admit your proposition—it *was* certainly indiscreet to discount the bills of Mr. Harold Harrington.” This was said with a sneer.

“I am not speaking of Mr. Harold Harrington.”

“Then, frankly, madam, your conversation is a riddle to me.” And Wilson put his hands in his trouser pockets, and leaned back in his chair.

“I want to speak to you of Captain Dashleigh.”

“Eh,” cried the banker, immediately becoming all attention. “What do you know about Captain Dashleigh?”

“A great deal more than you do,” returned the Countess. “But about one point our information is identical—we both know that he is penniless.”

“Be that as it may,” said Wilson; “what does it matter to you, what does it matter to me?”

“I see you will not understand me so; I must explain myself further. Captain Dashleigh for the last ten days has been the guest of Mr. Mostyn, of Mostyn Manor. During that time he has had plenty of money. Do you know where he got that money?”

“Very likely he borrowed the money from Mr. Mostyn.”

“The possibility might reach to the altitude of a probability if I did not know that he had received the money from you.”

“Were it so (a proposition I do not admit), still the affair would be a matter concerning only ourselves.”

“Not entirely—Mr. Wilson, you are a man of business, and when Mr. Harrington told me that he had heard of Captain Dashleigh being seen leaving your Bank I knew that Captain Dashleigh, on his departure, must have left with you some valuable security. You have advanced Captain Dashleigh, a beggar, some money, and consequently the security you hold must be more than usually valuable. Answer me; am I not right?”

The Banker got up and walked to the looking glass, suspended over the fire-place. With knitted brows he considered for a moment, then he turned round, and said,—

“You say you wish this to be a confidential chat—so far you have told me

only of myself—now tell me who you are and what you want. As you hint it is better that we should drop courteous phrases, and come to plain dealing, I repeat my question bluntly, Who are you, and what do you want?”

“I am a woman who is rich enough to buy revenge,” she answered.

An hour later the Countess had left London on her return to the country. The express train could not carry her fast enough to please her, and she watched impatiently the little way-side stations as they seemed to fly past her.

“At last,” she murmured, “at last.” Then she took a locket from her bosom, and pressed it to her lips. For a second her face softened, and there was moisture in her lustrous dark eyes. A moment later the old stern expression had returned to the cold pale face, and she once more gazed out into the deepening darkness at the country that appeared and faded away so quickly.

“Shall we never arrive!” she thought, “How I hunger to be near him! Did he but know, did he but know!” and the fierce eyes became fiercer, and the fixed lips more compressed.

Everything has an end—even a railway journey to Devonshire, and at last the Countess Donato arrived at her destination. As she alighted on the platform the station-master took off his cap to her.

“Any news, Mr. Edwards?”

“None, madam, except that Captain Dashleigh at Mostyn Manor is decidedly better. I saw the great London doctor on his way back to London, and made so bold as to ask him how he was, and he said that he was quite out of danger, but very weak. He said he would be as right as ever he was in a fortnight.”

“Capital news,” returned the Countess, “good night.”

“Good night, madam.”

Within an hour of her return the Countess Donato sent the following note to Mostyn Manor by hand:—

MY DEAR MR. HARRINGTON,

I have acted upon your suggestion, and have seen Mr. Wilson. I have been completely successful. I had no difficulty in obtaining what I wanted on my own terms.—Sincerely yours,
C. DONATO.

Then she went to a cabinet in her boudoir, and opened it. She touched a spring, and a secret drawer appeared.

“This may rest here until it is wanted,” and she placed a folded paper in the receptacle.

The folded paper contained these words:—

LONDON, 14th June, 187—.

I promise to pay Henry Parkhouse Wilson the sum of Five Thousand Pounds (£5000) on the day on which Fanny Mostyn, daughter of Jeremiah Mostyn, of Mostyn Manor, Cravington, Devonshire, becomes his wife.

(Signed) CHARLES HOWARD DASHLEIGH.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MURMUR OF A COMING STORM.

CAPTAIN DASHLEIGH was decidedly better. The fever had left him in a state of prostration, but still he was better. The place of Fanny and Amy at his bedside had been filled by a professional nurse. When he woke the morning after the Countess Donato's return to Devonshire, he felt himself a different man, and for the first time since his seizure became interested in what was passing around him. He noticed that a new face was bending over him and arranging his pillows.

"Where is Miss Mostyn, and who are you?" he asked in a weak voice.

"I am the nurse, sir," replied the attendant, "and replaced the young ladies yesterday."

"Have I been delirious?"

"Yes, sir—you were a little last night."

"And what did I say in my delirium?"

"I never attend to what patients say in their delirium—it isn't professional."

Dashleigh was silent for a moment, and he knitted his brows in anger. Then he said abruptly,

"I must get up."

"You had better wait until you have seen the doctor, sir."

"Nonsense, I feel perfectly well, I shall get up."

Finding persuasion of no avail, the nurse left him to his own devices.

Half an hour later Dashleigh staggered from his bedroom into the adjoining sitting room. He looked frightfully pale and haggard, as he gazed at himself in the looking glass. He rang the bell—it was answered by the nurse.

"Will you give my kindest regards to Miss Mostyn, and say that I will esteem it a great favour if she will allow me to see her."

The nurse left the room, and returned immediately with the message, that Miss Mostyn was unable to comply with Captain Dashleigh's request.

"Did she say nothing more?"

"Nothing more, sir."

"Where is she?"

"In her boudoir, sir."

"Is any one with her?"

"Only Mr. Harrington, sir."

Dashleigh frowned, and muttered a curse. Then he rose from the chair on which he had fallen, and staggered towards the door.

"Where are you going, sir?"

"To Miss Mostyn—out of my way," and he forced himself past the nurse, and walked unsteadily towards the boudoir.

"A pleasant patient," murmured the attendant, "but he said enough in his delirium to make me know that it would be a dangerous game to thwart him. Well, if he likes to pay the young lady a visit, why should I stop him? Let him go."

By this time, Dashleigh had reached the boudoir. He opened the door and entered. Fanny had been seated at a piano, with Harold at her side, turning over the leaves of a music-book. They both started to their feet as they saw him.

"As you would not come to me, I have come to you, Miss Mostyn," said Dashleigh, with a hollow laugh, "you know the story of Mahomet and the mountain. How do you do, Harrington—glad to find that you still are here."

Neither Fanny nor Harold answered him.

"I would not rest," continued Dashleigh, "a moment convalescent, without coming to thank you for all your kindness, Miss Mostyn. You have been very kind to me."

Fanny turned away from him, and laid her hand upon Harold's shoulder.

"You have nothing to say to me. Really, I don't understand this conduct, Miss Mostyn."

"It can be easily explained—" began Harold.

"What have you to do with it?" cried Dashleigh, sharply. "I spoke to you, Miss Mostyn, and not to Mr. Harrington."

"And I will answer you in her name," said Harold, firmly.

"Thanks, very much, but before you take the liberty, be good enough to give me your authority for committing such a gratuitous piece of impertinence."

"Certainly. Miss Mostyn will shortly be my wife, and I speak to you in the character of her future husband."

With something very like a groan, Dashleigh sank upon a chair. His chin rested upon his breast, and his eyes stared into vacancy.

"You had better leave us together," whispered Harold, and when Dashleigh again raised his head, he found himself alone with his rival.

"Curse you," he cried "may——"

"Stop," interrupted Harold, "so accomplished a man of the world as you, Captain Dashleigh, should know that violent language is invariably a mistake. Be reasonable, and listen to what I have to say. We two have been playing the same game, for the same prize. I have won, and you have lost, and it should not be necessary for me to suggest, that so daring a gambler as Captain Dashleigh should accept his failure with equanimity."

Harold paused for a moment, and then continued, "If it is any satisfaction to you to learn it, I can tell you, that I loved Miss Mostyn with all my soul long

before you crossed our path. I do not wish to insult you in your present condition. I feel for you as you sit there, weak and powerless before me, but must I own, that there is no step I would not have taken to prevent you from rendering the woman I love miserable for life. Fortunately, you, yourself, saved me the labour. In your delirium, you admitted enough to render any future revelations unnecessary. Miss Mostyn knows, by your own confession, that you are a libertine and a fortune-hunter."

Dashleigh buried his face in his hands, and was silent.

"Come," continued Harold, with the generosity so common in those who are successful in love, "you are not so much wronged, after all. There are plenty of fortunes to be had for the asking. Find some girl whose affections are not engaged. Mind, I loved her, for herself alone. Were she penniless, I have enough for us both, and to spare. I loved her.

"I loved her too!" said Dashleigh, in a hollow voice, speaking to himself rather than to Harold.

"You loved her!" cried Harrington, gazing in astonishment at the miserable, haggard face. Dashleigh did not move, his eyes were fixed and his frame motionless. His rival regarded him for a moment silently, and then added in a softer voice, "for the first time in my life, Dashleigh, I am sorry for you."

Dashleigh was left alone. For a few minutes he seemed to be in a trance, then he made a supreme effort and recovered himself.

"The game is not over yet, Harold Harrington," he muttered, "you little know me if you think that I will retire from the contest at the first defeat. Curse this illness, it has left me as weak and as foolish as a child. What shall I do? Be a man, Charles Dashleigh, and pull yourself together."

He rose from the chair and looked around him. On the floor at his feet he saw an envelope addressed to Harold Harrington, in a woman's handwriting.

"Come, here is something to inaugurate the fresh campaign. If I know anything of Fanny Mostyn, she has a fair share of jealousy. Let me see who has been writing to my favoured rival."

He picked up the envelope and took out the enclosure. He started with surprise as he read the contents. The letter was signed, C. Donato.

"I must get it back at all hazards," he murmured, "even if I have to meet the dead face to face—even if I have to meet the dead face to face!"

The doctor had called, and after seeing his patient had announced him convalescent.

"You have had a sharp attack, sir, and it is my duty to tell you, you have only yourself to thank for your illness. Late hours and excitement have reduced you to a perfect wreck, sir, a perfect wreck. Your constitution is utterly ruined. If you are not more careful of yourself you will have to call in an undertaker next time instead of a doctor."

And the fussy little practitioner pompously took his leave.

Dashleigh received the doctor's remarks with equanimity, but seemed

relieved when he had departed. With the letter that the Countess Donato had sent to Harrington before him, he sat motionless for an hour lost in deep thought. Then he rose from his chair and walked towards his portmanteau, and opened it.

"I had better be prepared for the worst," he murmured, "I little thought when I bought it in the States that I should ever regard this as anything more valuable than a curiosity," and he drew out a bowie knife from a leather case. "Who's there?"

"I only looked in to see if you wanted anything, sir," said a footman who had opened the door.

"Confound you!" cried Dashleigh, angrily, "what do you mean by coming in without knocking," and the captain hastily attempted to hide the knife he held in his hand.

"I am sure I am very sorry, sir."

"Never mind, that's enough," Dashleigh answered, sharply, "send that woman to me."

"Do you mean the nurse, sir, Mrs. Stammers?"

"Yes. Don't stand there all day, but do what I tell you."

The footman hurriedly withdrew.

"What a rage he's in," he thought to himself, "and what was he doing with that knife. I hope he ain't going to make away with himself, I hate them inquests, like poison."

Mrs. Stammers duly summoned, soon presented herself before the captain.

"You sent for me, sir."

"Yes, Mrs. Stammers. The doctor says I am very much better, and I really do not think I need trouble you to sit up with me to-night."

"You are very kind, sir, but I must not disobey my orders."

"Your orders!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Mostyn's orders. He told me to look after you, and not to leave you until his return. He's gone to London, sir, and I daren't disobey him."

"Why not?"

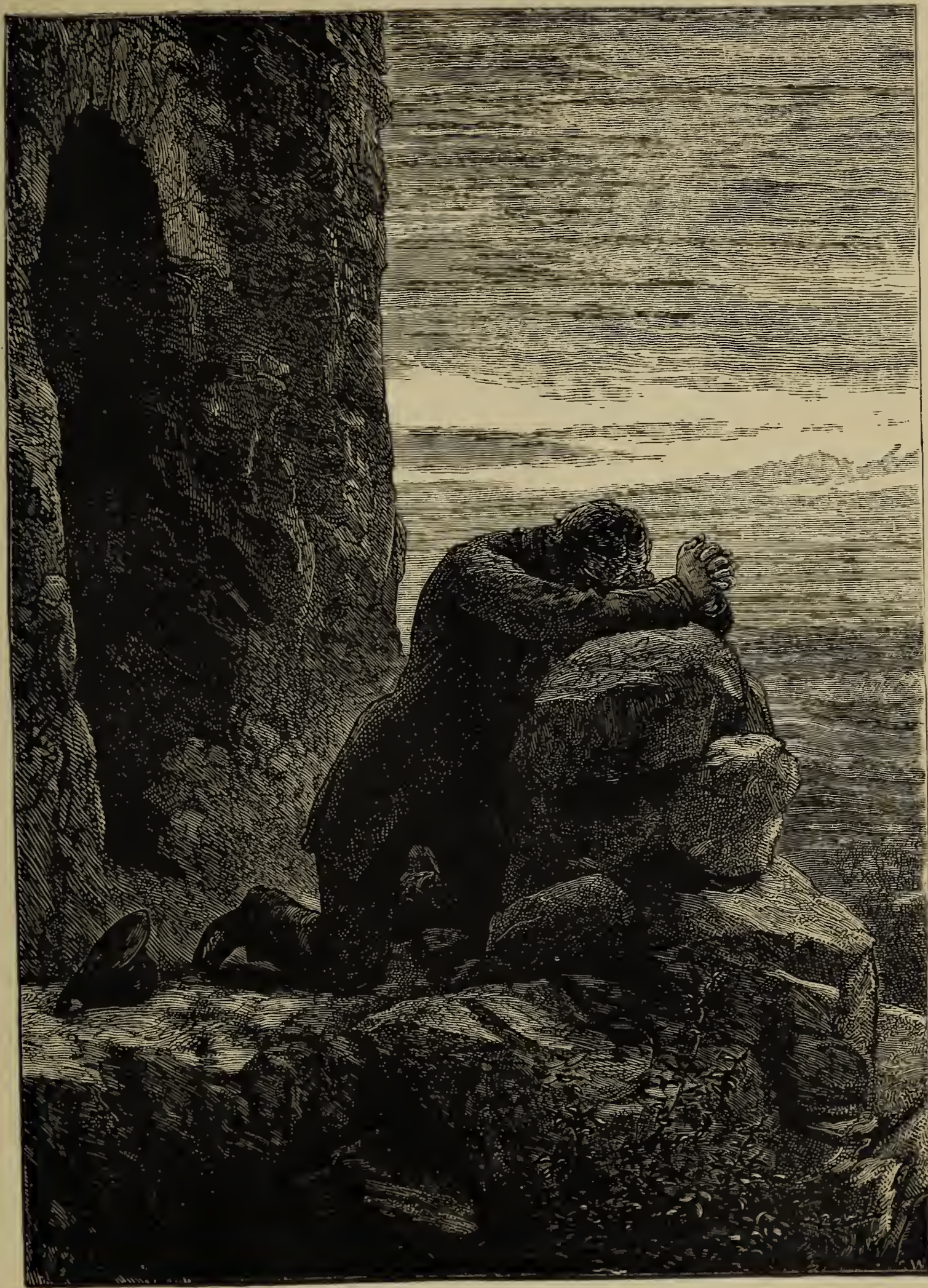
"Why, sir. he could ruin me. I am only a poor nurse, and if he liked to run me down in the neighbourhood I wouldn't know where to turn for a livelihood."

"You have a husband, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. I almost wish I hadn't," replied the nurse, with a sigh. "He keeps bad company, sir. He takes all my savings, and it is as much as I can do to keep the body and soul of our poor little girl together."

"Come, Mrs. Stammers," said Dashleigh, "you shall have your own way. I will, however, give you leave of absence for the evening. You can go away by this window and return by it, no one will know of your absence. I shall go to bed early, so don't disturb me on your return."

The nurse hesitated. "I certainly should like to see our poor little girl, sir, but——"



"He tried to pray."—See page 71.

"Don't say another word. You shall see her, and now good evening. I will leave the window open, so you will be able to enter the house without disturbing any one. Once more, good evening, Mrs. Stammers."

"Good evening, sir."

At about eight o'clock, Dashleigh opened the door leading into the corridor, and looked out. The footman who had entered the room in the afternoon, was passing.

"I spoke rather sharply to you a short time ago," said Dashleigh. "You know I am just recovering from a severe illness. I am very sorry, however, to have lost my temper."

The footman did not reply, but he looked gratified.

"What is that you have in your hand?" asked Dashleigh.

"Master's bull's eye, sir," the footman answered, "Master, when he's at home, sir, always goes round the place with this the last thing at night to see that all's right. I have just been cleaning it. I am going to put it back ready trimmed, sir, on the hall table."

"Very well, good night."

"Good night, sir. I beg your pardon, sir, but will Mrs. Stammers come down to supper?"

"I think not, the poor woman's just asleep, and I don't like to disturb her. If she wakens up I will tell her that supper's ready."

"Thank you kindly, sir. You don't want anything more to-night, sir?"

"No thanks. Good night."

"Good night, sir," and then the footman thought to himself as he placed the dark lantern in its accustomed place, "Come, the Captain's in a better temper now. I wonder what's made him so civil. It ain't like him, and looks like games!"

CHAPTER V.

ROUND AND ABOUT THE FARMERS' ARMS.

A COUPLE of miles from Mostyn Manor, stood a small public house known as the Farmers' Arms. Why it should have received this respectable sign-board it is impossible to say, because, to tell the truth, it was the worst of all the bad characters in the neighbourhood. Year after year, when the question of renewing the license came before the Magistrates a fierce battle was fought by the rival lawyers engaged in the case. The landlord was a sharp man of business, and employed the best available talent at the bar, to watch his interests. Shortly before licensing day, the Farmers' Arms would apparently change its character. Its doors would close half an hour earlier than its wont, and "drunk and disorderlies" would be prohibited the premises. At these times the most amiable of the Bench would be invited to come and admire the excellent management of the property. When this had been accomplished, their evidence was reserved for a future occasion—the

occasion of the application for the renewal of the license. Immediately upon a new lease of immunity being granted, the Farmers' Arms relapsed into its old courses and became noisier and more disreputable than ever. On the night of Mrs. Stammers' walk, the public house was at about its worst.

The landlord was driving a roaring trade. A strike had just taken place in the neighbourhood, and the hardy sons of toil who had given up work were spending the allowances awarded them by their "societies" in drink. The British labourer when full of beer is generally pugnacious or musical; he either sings you a song, or attempts to knock you down; on this occasion the British workman was in his more amiable mood, and consequently sounds of not altogether sweet melody were wafted away in the evening air. On the bench round a tree in front of the inn were two or three revellers sleeping the sleep of the drunkard. The landlord, red-nosed and portly, smoked a long clay pipe, and looked at his guests with decided approval.

"All the rooms full?" he asked the barman.

"Yes, master, as full as they will hold. It's as much as I and Mary can do to keep them going with beer. Lord bless us, the strike seems to have done them good rather than harm—they are drinking like fishes."

"You keep the missuses from kicking up a row?"

"Lord bless us, yes, master. The Farmers' Arms is a highly respectable place, and we ain't going to allow any of the wives to make a disturbance as they say before the beaks."

"That's right. Hallo, who are these?"

The barman (a cockney by birth) looked in the direction pointed out to him, and declared, that he believed "these" to be Londoners.

"There's no mistaking a chap from town," said the barman, "you can tell who they are in less than no time. You take my word for it, master, these men are fresh from the little village, and from the cut of their jibs, I would advise you strongly to keep an eye upon them. You may rest certain that they ain't come here for any good."

The subjects of this opinion steadily advanced towards the Farmers' Arms. They were two men of about the same size. One was smartly dressed in the extremity of the existing fashion: the other wore the costume of an artizan. The first took the lead in the conversation.

"Can we have a private room, landlord?" he asked, with a flourish of his stick. "My friend and I have some business to transact, and we want to be alone."

"You can have almost everything at the Farmers' Arms," replied the landlord surlily, "by paying for it—in advance."

The smartly-dressed stranger smiled, and produced his purse.

"Not accustomed to respectable customers, eh?" said he, "you are quite right to be careful. Well, my good man, here are ten shillings. Lead us to a room, send in the spirit case, and see that we are not disturbed."

The landlord's eyes and hands opened wide, as the coin was produced, and at a nod from his master the barman led the way inside.

"I say look here," said the second stranger, "if Stammers comes——."

"Shut up!" whispered his companion, "no names, man, no names."

"Yes, if Bill Stammers comes?" suggests the barman.

"Never mind," replied the gaily dressed visitor, and the two men passed into the room that had been reserved for them.

"Now that we are alone," said the fellow dressed in the costume of an artizan, "I tell you what it is. I don't like the business at all. You see if we don't make a mess of it."

"Nonsense, Jack, why should we? Everything's as right as right can be. You are always grumbling, but what's the matter now?"

The man called Jack sat down and helped himself to a glass of brandy from the spirit case, which had been brought into the room by the barman.

"I don't half like it," he groaned out, as the door closed upon the retreating waiter. "Why wouldn't we have worked it alone? The man ain't to be trusted, I tell you. Why, he's always drunk, and will be blabbing it all out before we know where we are. You are wrong, Bob; take my word for it, you are wrong."

"But don't you see how well it works in," said Bob. "We go to the room and find everything ready for us. No bother of cutting glass or opening shutters. All plain, nice, straight-forward work. We take the swag and are back again in town by the evening."

"Yes, that's all very well, but suppose his missus cuts up rough and won't do it. What then?"

"I never did see such a chap as you. Nothing pleases you! You don't deserve to succeed. I tell you what, Jack, if I hear another word, I cut the whole thing."

Jack said nothing, but looked surlily before him. Bob walked impatiently up and down the room, stopping every now and then to gaze through the window.

"There's splendid weather for you," said he at last, "as dark as pitch. You don't deserve it. The beastly moon ought to rise just to spite you."

"It won't matter much, whether it does or not. You won't see him. He's shirking it, and so as you can't work without him, you won't be able to work at all."

Bob swore a good round oath, and declared that his companion would provoke the patience of a saint.

"Oh, go on, go on," continued Jack, "hard words don't break bones. There's nothing to prevent him rounding upon us. I shouldn't be surprised if he hadn't put the coppers upon us already."

Bob had opened the window during this last piece of grumbling on the part of his companion, and was now looking out.

"Hush," he whispered, "blow the candle out, Jack, and hold your row. Here's our man coming this way, and he's got his missis with him. We may as well hear what they have got to say as anybody else."

Jack obeyed orders, and in two minutes the companions were standing by the open window, eagerly listening.

"I repeat I have given you my last penny," the woman was saying as the new comers came to the inn, "I can't do more than that."

"It's all bosh," replied the man, "with all the nobs staying in the house too! Do you mean to say you don't pick up more than a shiner and a half?"

"Why should they give me more?"

"When they come to see the baby, to be sure."

"I have told you that I am attending to a surgical case. I am waiting upon a gentleman."

"Ah! to be sure you did," replied the man, in a thick voice. "Well, come along, and let's have a drink."

"You must be mad!" exclaimed the woman. "Do you think I would show myself in such a place as the Farmers' Arms?"

"Why shouldn't you go into the Farmers' Arms, ain't it respectable enough for you?" Then the bully seized his wife by the arm, and cried in a drunken voice, "I tell you what it is, my lady, what is good enough for me, is good enough for you. So come in."

"You hurt me," said the woman, releasing herself with difficulty. "I see you are not in a mood to speak to me, so good-night."

She would have moved away, when he again seized her by the arm,

"Not so fast. You stay here until I have done talking to you. You shan't go a moment sooner. Now then."

The tears sprang to the woman's eyes.

"That it should have come to this!"

"Don't snivel. I ain't in a mood for snivelling, so I tell you so at once."

The woman turned away her head and wiped her eyes. The man appeared to summon up his courage for some effort. He spoke still in a brutal tone, but the roughness of his speech now seemed to be half assumed.

"Look here. I am not going to believe what you tell me about not having any more money."

"It is as true as I am a living woman."

"That ain't enough for me, I must have proof."

"But what proof can I give you?"

The ruffian paused for a moment, and then said,

"I tell you what it is, I shall come and see for myself."

The woman uttered a low cry.

"Oh, Bill, you mustn't! What would they say if they knew that you were my husband? It would lose me the place, it would, indeed."

"But why should they know it?"

"How could they avoid it if you came?"

"Why, it would be all right if I came without their knowing anything about it."

The man looked away, and moved unsteadily.

"What do you mean?" cried his wife, "I will know what you mean!"

"Don't get excited about it," said the man. "There's nothing to fuss about."

What you say is true enough—it wouldn't do for them to see me. Well, they needn't. All you will have to do, will be to leave the window, looking out on the lawn, ajar, and it will be all right. We—I mean, I promise not to disturb anybody."

"We," echoed the woman with terrified eyes. "Oh, Bill, you are planning a robbery. You are in bad company, and are planning a robbery."

"What nonsense! What should put that into your head? Now, you have heard what I have said—do you mean to obey me or not?"

The woman answered never a word, but stood trembling with fear.

"Come, you know me well enough by this time, to feel that when I say I *will* have an answer, I *will* have my way. Come, are you going to open the window or not?"

"I won't," she cried, "you may kill me, but I won't."

In a moment he had seized her by the arm, and had raised his fist.

"Bill Stammers, come here, you fool, Bill Stammers."

The ruffian paused in his violence, and looked round to see the man who had cried out to him. His wife, taking advantage of his momentary confusion, seized the opportunity to break away from him, and to fly for her life into the sheltering darkness. The man uttered an oath and tried to find her.

"Come up here, Bill Stammers," again cried the voice, and a light appeared at a window in the inn, showing the face of the man called Bob. "Don't waste time about it, but come up here directly."

"Do you know?" began Stammers. He was interrupted.

"We know everything," said Bob; "you both talked so loud that we heard all your conversation. Come up, I say, and don't play the fool any longer."

Stammers entered the Farmers' Arms and presented himself in a few minutes before Bob and his companion.

"Why did you make me let her go? She will inform the police to a certainty—you see if she doesn't?"

"Nonsense, man," returned Bob. "She cares much too much for you to do that. You have been drinking, Bill, and had I left you with her a moment longer, you would have done something foolish."

"What do you mean by that? What do you mean by interfering between man and wife?"

The ruffian spoke in a thick voice, and looked threateningly at his opponent.

"None of that," said Bob calmly. "Ask my friend here, and he will tell you I know how to keep a whole gang in order, much less a fellow like you. Come, and let us talk the matter over rationally."

"But why did you interfere between me and my wife? What did you expect I would have done to her?"

"Why, murdered her, to be sure. Now, murder isn't half so profitable as burglary, and is twice as dangerous, so sit down, man, and let's put our heads together."

CHAPTER VI.

A VISIT TO THE LION'S DEN.

MRS. STAMMERS, the nurse, on escaping from her husband, ran as fast as she could towards Mostyn Manor. After a few minutes of breathless haste she slackened her speed, and then stopped and listened. A perfect silence reigned around. She evidently had not been followed.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" she murmured, and then sat down upon the grass and buried her face in her hands.

For some time she could not collect her thoughts. She was terribly frightened, and at every sound started as if an enemy had suddenly appeared before her. By and by she became calmer, and then she tried to look the situation in the face.

"I must not betray my husband," she thought, "and yet if I don't, how shall I save the house?—more, how shall I prevent bloodshed?"

Once more she rose to her feet and resumed her journey. As she walked along at a rapid rate, she considered what would be the best course to pursue. Should she tell the captain, should she speak to Mr. Mostyn, should she consult Harold Harrington?"

By this time she had arrived at the sitting-room, which had been yielded to her charge. The window was ajar as she had expected to find it. She entered the room, the lamp was burning, but the place was empty. She sat down on a chair, and once more tried to arrange her thoughts.

"The Captain has gone to bed early," she said to herself, "I wish he hadn't. He might have advised me. We must keep them out, but how?"

She got up and for the first time noticed that a letter was lying on the table. It was addressed to herself. She opened it, and read as follows:—

MRS. STAMMERS,
I feel very tired. I have taken a sleeping draught, and do not wish to be disturbed until the morning.

CHARLES HOWARD DASHLEIGH.

"But I *must* disturb him," she murmured. "It will be better to go to him than to the others. He has been a soldier, and will know how to defend the place against these miserable companions of my wretched husband."

She went to the door of the Captain's bedroom, and knocked. Her summons was disregarded, and then she repeated the warning more loudly. Again she

met with no response. She then put her hand upon the handle, and tried to open the door. The door was locked.

"Very strange," she thought, "it is the first time the Captain has ever locked his door. Captain Dashleigh, Captain Dashleigh, I *must* see you at once."

She rattled at the handle and knocked at the door again and again, but without any result. The silence that followed upon each summons was oppressive.

"I may be able to call to him through his window. He always leaves it open."

With terrified haste she left the sitting-room, and ran on to the lawn. Then she paused for a moment and listened.

"As yet we are safe," she thought, "they have not come to us yet—thank Heaven for it."

Then she hurried to the window of the Captain's room. It was open. This side of Mostyn Manor was in the French style, and consequently the windows reached from the ceiling to the floor. The place was in perfect darkness.

"Captain Dashleigh, Captain Dashleigh!" she cried once again, "I must see you. Your life is in danger—all our lives are in danger!"

Then she was silent and listened. She fancied that she could hear a window opening on the first floor.

"I shall wake up the house," she thought, "and then my husband will be taken. I mustn't do that. Oh Heaven, what shall I do? Captain Dashleigh, Captain Dashleigh!"

By this time she had entered the room. She stood listening for a second, and then repeated her cry. It met with no response.

"How still he is! I can't even hear his breathing. I hope there is nothing wrong."

She groped her way in the darkness to the table, and possessed herself of a match box. Then she lighted the candle—no one was there! The bed of the Captain was unused. "Gone!" she murmured, "gone!"

Taking the candle up she carefully examined the ground outside the window, and found foot-prints.

"He has left the house!" she cried in amazement. "What can have caused him to do this! What shall I do now?"

As she stood looking out into the darkness, she suddenly saw a flash of light in the far distance. Her heart stood still. For a moment she imagined that the light might belong to her husband and his companions.

"Are they on their way here!" she cried, "Heaven save us all, Heaven save us!"

In a moment more she was relieved. The flash of light, now seen and now lost, instead of nearing the house, appeared to be leaving it.

"What can it be? It looks like a dark lantern. Who should take a dark lantern across those fields? and where is it going?"

She gazed earnestly at the flash of light, and then murmured, "Why, it is moving in the direction of the house of the Countess Donato."

The nurse stood quite still, and then repeated the name, "The Countess Donato."

Mrs. Stammers, in common with the rest of the neighbourhood, had heard a great deal about the English lady with the foreign title. The stories about her coolness and bravery had been carried by the winds everywhere.

"Why should I not consult the Countess?" thought the nurse, "she has a man's courage, and a woman's heart. The house is not ten minutes walk. I daren't be left alone here to meet my husband. Anything would be better than that. I can be back in half an hour. I must risk it."

She re-entered the sitting-room, and carefully locked the door, placing the key in the Captain's hat-box.

"It mustn't be found upon me," she thought, "and they are not likely to look for it there."

Then she turned out the lamp, and once more left the house. She waited for a moment as she reached the lawn. All was silent. She looked in the direction in which she had last seen the flash of light. Nothing appeared now. If the spark had been the glare of a dark lantern, it had disappeared. Wrapping her cloak closely around her, she hurried away.

She had not walked for five minutes before she heard the whispering sound of hushed voices. She had left the grounds of Mostyn Manor and was now passing across a field. At the end of the field were a stile and a plank bridge crossing a small country stream. She had reached the plank bridge before she noticed that there were others abroad beside herself.

"Take things coolly," she heard a man say. "Let's rest a while. The later the better for our work. It's no use hurrying them. Let them get comfortably to sleep before we begin."

"You were always a cool hand," replied a surly voice, "I believe you will go to be hanged smoking. And now, mate, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

At the sound of the reply, laconic as it was, Mrs. Stammers grew terribly agitated. She had recognised her husband's tones. Trembling with terror she knelt down and crept behind some bushes, which served as a shield to allow her to escape observation.

"Nothing," repeated Bob with a jeer, "you say nothing, as if it was your last word. Why man, alive, wake up and be cheerful. Come now, what could be better? Here's the Captain out of the way, and your Missis on account of her relationship to you, completely muzzled. Surely you couldn't have anything fairer than that?"

Stammers, who had reached the surly state of intoxication, merely grunted, and hurled a curse at his wife.

"Mark my words, she will spoil it all."

"I hate being rude to a lady," said Bob, producing the neatest of life preservers, "but if women *will* interfere, why—they must take the consequences," and he knocked off a twig from a tree with his formidable weapon.

The nurse in her concealment trembled and held her breath.

"What was that?" cried Stammers sharply. "I surely heard something."

"You are always hearing something," replied Jack; "why, it's only a water rat. You are as nervous as a pig."

"What if I am. It's no business of yours, is it?"

"No quarrelling," said Bob interposing. "We've got something else to do. To change the subject, I wonder what he was doing with that dark lantern. Up to no good I'll be bound!"

"Why not?" asked Stammers surlily.

"If you knew him as well as I do, you wouldn't ask the question. He's the coolest and most dangerous man about town."

"It looked as if he were taking a leaf out of our book; now, didn't it?"

"Very likely," replied Bob with a laugh. "It's not the first time he has been mixed up with a little business out of the common. And now if you are ready we will move on."

The three men rose from the style and crossed the plank bridge, close to the bush behind which the nurse was hiding. Then they travelled rapidly towards Mostyn Manor. With her heart in her mouth, Mrs. Stammers watched her husband's departure, and then hurried away in the opposite direction.

"I can't get back to the Manor now," she reasoned, "the path is closed to me. The best thing I can do is to push on to the house of the Countess Donato."

She hurried across the plank bridge and crossed the style. As she stood on the top bar, the moon, until now hidden, suddenly emerged from the clouds, and illuminated the country for miles around. As luck would have it, at this moment her husband, now some distance off, suddenly turned round and recognised her. She uttered a shriek and sprang down. The moment afterwards the moon was again lost behind the clouds, and the night was once more as dark as pitch.

She waited in the most abject fear, listening eagerly to hear the dreaded footsteps. But her husband did not return, and she went her way.

By this time she had reached the entrance to the grounds of the house. The little lodge was dark and lonely. The gate-keeper and his family had evidently retired to rest long before. She passed through and hastened up to the windows of the boudoir, which looked out upon the lawn. The room next to the Countess' sanctum, was evidently in occupation, as she could see reflections upon the blind. She considered whether she should enter by the window or the door. She was anxious naturally enough not to disturb the household. She knew that busy tongues would be set a wagging, if she were seen at that hour of the night. Her one idea was to save the household of Mostyn Manor, without compromising her husband. How was this to be done? By a frank confession to the Countess, and a prayer for counsel and help. She decided that it would be advisable to see the lady secretly.

"Shall I go to the boudoir or to the bedroom?"

The first was in darkness; the second was illuminated. She made up her

mind that she would proceed to the latter, when a sudden flash of light in the boudoir attracted her attention.

"The boudoir contains a thief!" she thought, and became deadly pale. She had now another object in view. To warn the Countess of her danger. She heard her heart beating as she crawled up to the boudoir window, and peered into the room. She started back, as she noted its contents.

Before a writing-table stood a man holding a dark lantern. His back was turned towards her, and consequently she could not see his face. He had forced open the desk, and had ransacked many of the drawers. Apparently he was dissatisfied with the result of his search, for he still actively examined the mechanism of the cabinet. His inspection had evidently turned out fruitless; at last he accidentally touched a spring, and a secret drawer discovered itself. An exclamation of delight escaped him as he took out a paper. He threw the light of the dark lantern upon it, and having satisfied himself that he had possessed himself of the right document, carefully placed it in his breast-pocket. Then he closed the desk quietly, and on tip-toe withdrew. As he passed Mrs. Stammers the light of the lantern fell upon his face.

The thief was Captain Dashleigh!

Ten minutes later and Mrs. Stammers had told her story to the Countess.

"Take this," cried the lady, on the narrative coming to an end. "Take this and wear it for my sake," and the Countess forced upon the nurse a magnificent bracelet set with brilliants of the first water. "You deserve it. You have at last run to earth a man unworthy to walk upon it."

"And now that I have told you all, madam," said Mrs. Stammers, "what do you propose to do?"

"What do I propose to do? Why, to follow the thief to his own house. What do I propose to do? Why to meet Captain Dashleigh face to face—and for the last time!"

CHAPTER VII.

FACE TO FACE.

To return to Mr. William Stammers and his companions.

"My wife, as I am a living sinner!" cried the ruffian, as the sudden appearance of the moon revealed the poor woman, "now I will do for her."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Bob, calmly but firmly, "you are far too fond of violence, and I tell you that violence never pays in the long run."

The matter was decided by the moon. It suddenly disappeared behind a cloud, and the country became apparently gloomier than ever, now that the flitting light was withdrawn. It had become impossible to follow Mrs. Stammers with any chance of finding her.

"You have made a nice mess of this," continued Bob, turning sharply upon

the husband. "You have bullied and frightened your wife until it's hard to say what she will do. You can guide a woman with a skein of silk if you only know how to treat her."

"Well, then, why didn't you let me get at her? I would have silenced her in less than no time."

"Shut up, once for all," said Bob, "murder isn't our line of country, and it shan't be yours either while you are with us, mind that now, and let's have no more chatter about it."

"It would have been much better if we had worked this business single handed," grumbled Jack.

"I really believe you are right," replied Bob, "but here we are in for it now, so it's no use repining. What's to be the next move?"

The three estimable persons then held a consultation. It did not take long. It was decided that a descent should be made upon Mostyn Manor at once, before the alarm could be given. Moreover, it was arranged that the honour of leading the attack should devolve upon Bob, Jack and Stammers acting as a reserve, the former to give warning of the approach of an enemy, the latter to keep the tongue of his wife (should she appear,) in proper subjection.

To carry out the programme, Bob immediately advanced towards the French windows, opening out of Dashleigh's rooms upon the lawn. Leaving his companions concealed in the bushes, he moved forward very cautiously, waiting every second step to listen to hear if his approach had been noticed by any one belonging to the house. As he got close up to the windows, he heard a "click," and the pale light of a dark lantern was thrown upon him.

"The coppers, the coppers!" he murmured, "it's all up now."

"Bob the Watcher, as I live!" exclaimed Dashleigh, who had just returned from his ramble. "Well, Mr. Bob the Watcher, and what do you want here at this time of the night? Come to give me any information?"

Bob, who had been greatly startled, quickly recovered himself. He touched his hat with a grin, as he recognised the Captain's voice, and replied,

"You were always a cool hand, sir, and you take it very well, sir. Sorry you should have recognised me, Captain, as it will be the worse for you. I am sure I can't help it. We would have let you alone if we could."

"We," said Dashleigh, laying a stress upon the word, "then there are others with you."

"Well, of course, sir, you see a job of this sort couldn't be managed without the aid of talented assistants."

"What job?"

"Why, house-breaking, to be sure, Captain. I may as well be frank with you at once. You can't stop us. To begin with, you are far too weak to tackle one of us, much less half a dozen. What bothers me, sir, is what we are to do with you. You see I have known you a good many years, sir, meeting you at all the races in the country. But, according to the rules of the game, I ought to

settle you. You have recognised me, and to square things properly, I ought to tap you on the head with a life-preserver."

"You are very good, but has it ever occurred to you, that two can play at that game?" and the Captain produced his own life-preserver.

"The odds are against you, sir," continued Bob, with the coolness habitual to him. "I really think you had better try another way. What could you do against us all?"

"What I have done before, give you a sound thrashing."

"Yes, sir, so you think; but we shall be too many for you this time. Don't do it, sir, if you will take my advice, as a sincere well-wisher, and one who knows and appreciates you at your proper value. You had much better come to terms, sir. Take my advice, sir, and come to terms."

"What, compound a felony, and let you go free?"

"Well, that's better, sir, than forcing us to——well, tap you on the head."

"But, supposing I consented to be silent while you were robbing me and my host, how do you know I would keep my word afterwards?"

"I am accustomed to the company of gentlemen, Captain, and between gentlemen a word is as good as a bond. Besides, I have got another reason for trusting you. You might say some very awkward things about me, but I, on the other hand, could blurt out some very awkward things about you. You have come in from *your* work, while we are only commencing ours. You asked me just now what I was doing here, I answered you frankly enough. Supposing I was to ask *you* what you *were* doing over yonder—what would you answer?" and Bob pointed to the house of the Countess Donato.

Captain Dashleigh considered a moment. He felt that the man before him, to a certain extent, held him in his power. "You are the most impudent scoundrel I have ever met," began Dashleigh.

"Thank you, kindly, Captain, always pleased to get a good testimonial from a patron."

"I repeat, you are the most impudent scoundrel I have met, but, after all, your presence here is not my business. You may have come, in spite of your injudicious assertion to the contrary, to admire the grounds. Well, don't come near my premises (I may mention casually there is nothing of value in the rooms), and I have nothing more to say to you. I am not a policeman. Good night."

"Good night, Captain."

The two men separated. The Captain returned to his quarters, leaving Bob the watcher to do what he pleased.

"I suppose the place is properly locked up," he thought. "If it isn't, well, so much the better for Bob, and so much the worse for Mostyn." Then he returned to his room and walked up to a table and poured himself out a glass of brandy and drained it to the dregs. But in spite of this the reaction came, and he sank helplessly into a chair.

For the last hour excitement had given him unnatural strength. Scarcely recovered from an exhausting illness, he had yet been able to walk to the house

of the Countess Donato, to secure the paper that would have ruined all his hopes and to return. The walk had been little better than a crawl. He had staggered along like a drunken man. But his iron will had carried him through. He had recklessly made the resolve and as recklessly kept it. For once his lucky star had been in the ascendant, and a short search had ended in success. The paper given to Rivers the banker was lying before him. He had nothing more to fear. Nothing more to fear? Well, no. The men outside would not touch him. He knew Bob the watcher as a sporting tout of the worst character—a fellow who, once respectable, had fallen very low—much lower than his companions. He remembered that this housebreaker belonged to the most dangerous class in the whole world—the class which gives up all the ties of gentle birth to sink to blackguardism. But he felt that he could trust him. Once more, he had nothing to fear from Bob the watcher.

Still, would it not be better to take precautions? Bob might be true, but how about his companions? Suppose Bob revealed the substance of their interview to his followers, might not one of them return to complete the job? He would arm himself at any rate. Summoning all his strength he rose from his chair, and walked with feeble steps to a cabinet upon which was resting a leather case. He opened this case and drew from it the bowie knife. It was keen and sharp. Then he returned to the chair at the table and seated himself. He placed the knife before him in readiness beside the paper he had given to Wilson the banker.

Now surely he had nothing to fear. He was armed now. And yet he felt a haunting dread. He experienced that terrible presentiment of coming trouble which some men know, before they are stricken down with the awful calamity which has been waiting for them for years. He scarcely dared to raise his eyes.

“What a fool I am,” he murmured, “I must rouse myself. This illness has filled my head with a sick man’s fancies.”

And then he remembered the cause of his illness. He shuddered as he thought of the shock which had finished what years of sleepless nights and days of dissipation had begun. He trembled as he saw again in the mirror of his memory that pale, calm face which seemed to have risen from the grave to haunt him. Oh that he could forget the past, oh that the past had never been!

It was too late now. He must live. The past was indeed the past; the future was before him. Yes he must live, he wanted to live. Only a month ago he would have laid down his life without a moment’s hesitation, but now all things were changed. He had an object in view which had given value to his miserable existence. He, the gambler, the *roué*, the creature without faith in man or God, was in love. Love, a desecration of the word when he used it, and yet love. He had come down to Mostyn Manor to marry Fanny for her money, and now he found that the girl was the ruler, and he the slave. This love had maddened him with jealousy, had given him supernatural strength. It was this love that caused him to make the effort for which he was now paying so dearly. He knew that the document he had given to Wilson once in Fanny’s

hands, and he was a ruined man. In his time he had had his successes in the lists of love, and was as certain as of his own life that a woman never forgives an affront to her vanity. Fanny might pardon coldness, infidelity, treason, but she would never forget that her wealth had been preferred to her beauty. It had therefore been necessary to secure the paper, and he had secured it. But at a terrible cost. He was trembling with agitation; his clothes, too, were disarranged. In the mad haste of his return he had caught his coat in a bramble and it was torn in several places. He looked as if he had been recently engaged in some deadly struggle.

"Let me think," he said, "let me compose my thoughts."

Then he reviewed again the events of the evening; the leaving of the nurse, followed by his own departure: the entry into the house; the search for the paper; its discovery, and his return. Then he remembered that the knife lying before him was the outcome of his interview with Bob the watcher. His nerves, shattered by his recent excitement, allowed his apprehensions once more to arise. In his agitation he had forgotten the open window. He must close and bar the shutters. He tried to leave his chair, and then a sudden dread seized him. Once more he dared not raise his eyes. He feared some unseen presence. He heard the beatings of his heart, and every pulse seemed to throb in unison. He tried to reason away his fears, but they remained. He was as weak as a child, and had lost all the resolution of his manhood.

Then he began to listen intently. What was this moving about the room with stealthy footsteps? He heard distinctly the window closed, the shutters barred.

He was no longer alone. Who was with him?

The cold drops of perspiration collected on his brow, and he would have prayed in the extremity of his unreasoning terror. But prayers were driven away by horrible thoughts of the past. Heaven's gates were closed against him. If he could but raise his eyes, if he could but know the worst! As a man, he was no coward. He had faced death a score of times and looked upon suicide as a sleepless invalid racked with pain regards a narcotic. No, it was not the timidity of the coward that kept him spell-bound.

He listened again. The footsteps were falling upon the carpet—were coming near him.

He must know the worst. He raised his eyes and saw the face he knew so well, the face he would have fled from through the wide world. The face that appeared before him like the head of Medusa.

Their eyes met. Then a cloth steeped in some strong spirits was pressed against his face. He struggled weakly, and still more weakly as his wits quitted him. Oh, that he should be alone with her!

The body was convulsive for a moment. Only for a moment, for there came a death-like trance. The hands unclasped, the head fell back, the breathing almost ceased. Dashleigh no longer feared, for Dashleigh no longer lived. Under the influence of the chloroform, body and soul, so it seemed, had parted company in the presence of the avenger.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTAIN DASHLEIGH'S DREAM.

Now Captain Dashleigh dreamed a dream, and a strange dream it was.

He dreamed that when he regained his consciousness, he found himself bound hand and foot to the chair upon which he was sitting. He dreamed that the woman he had believed dead, was standing before him with triumph in her eyes, and holding in her hand the long keen knife he had taken from its case half an hour before.

"At last we meet," said the woman, and her voice trembled with a mighty hatred, "at last we meet, Captain Dashleigh, on equal terms."

He seemed to regain his utterance.

"Forgive me," he murmured, "once you loved me——"

"I loved you!" she hissed out. "You who murdered my sister—not with the assassin's knife, but with the cruel neglect of the heartless *roué*. *I loved you!*"

"Was it a dream after all?" he thought. His heart was relieved of the supernatural dread that had possessed it since the meeting at the garden party. This was no dead woman—no, only a dead woman's sister. He nearly laughed as he looked at her, and his lost courage came back to him.

She gazed earnestly at him, and there was fresh triumph in her glance.

"So you thought that I was the dead come back to haunt you. This is great news, glorious news! Every pang of torture you have felt is part payment of a debt that can never be repaid until you die a miserable, shameful death, until you are swinging on the gallows."

By this time he had regained his composure. After all, the situation had greatly improved. He was no longer facing a spirit from the grave, but merely a spiteful woman much given to the frantic rant of melodrama.

"You are very good," said he, "to have done me the honour of a visit. I would rise to welcome you if I could, but ——"

"You are bound hand and foot," she answered. "Do you want to know why?"

"Not in the least, I leave curiosity to women. Doubtless you had some excellent reason for this rather absurd freak. You would laugh, if you had the slightest sense of the ridiculous, as I do," and he forced a smile.

"I have drugged and tied you thus, because you are a man, and I am a woman, you are strong and I am weak, because I *would* be sure of my revenge. It was thus we tied spies and traitors in the Italian war, before we killed them!"

"Let me congratulate you upon your adventures. Quite a heroine of romance! And so you are going to kill me. What a waste of time! Why, my dear creature, I have thought a score of times of killing myself."

"I know it, and would not let you."

"You would not let me?"

"No, because I determined to be your executioner. Not a month ago I saw death written on your face as you left the club in which you had gambled away your last pound, your last remnant of honour. I had you followed, and it was my hand that held up the pistol when it was already pointed to your ear."

"Oh, *you* sent me the thou, did you? How very good of you. On my word, you have taken a great deal of trouble, and deserve some reward. And so you want to kill me. Well, you can have your way."

"And you think that you will lose your life like this—a single pang and oblivion. You believe that I am as gentle as my sister."

"Poor Alice!" he murmured, and for the first time his face softened. The scornful smile left his lips, and there was moisture in his eyes.

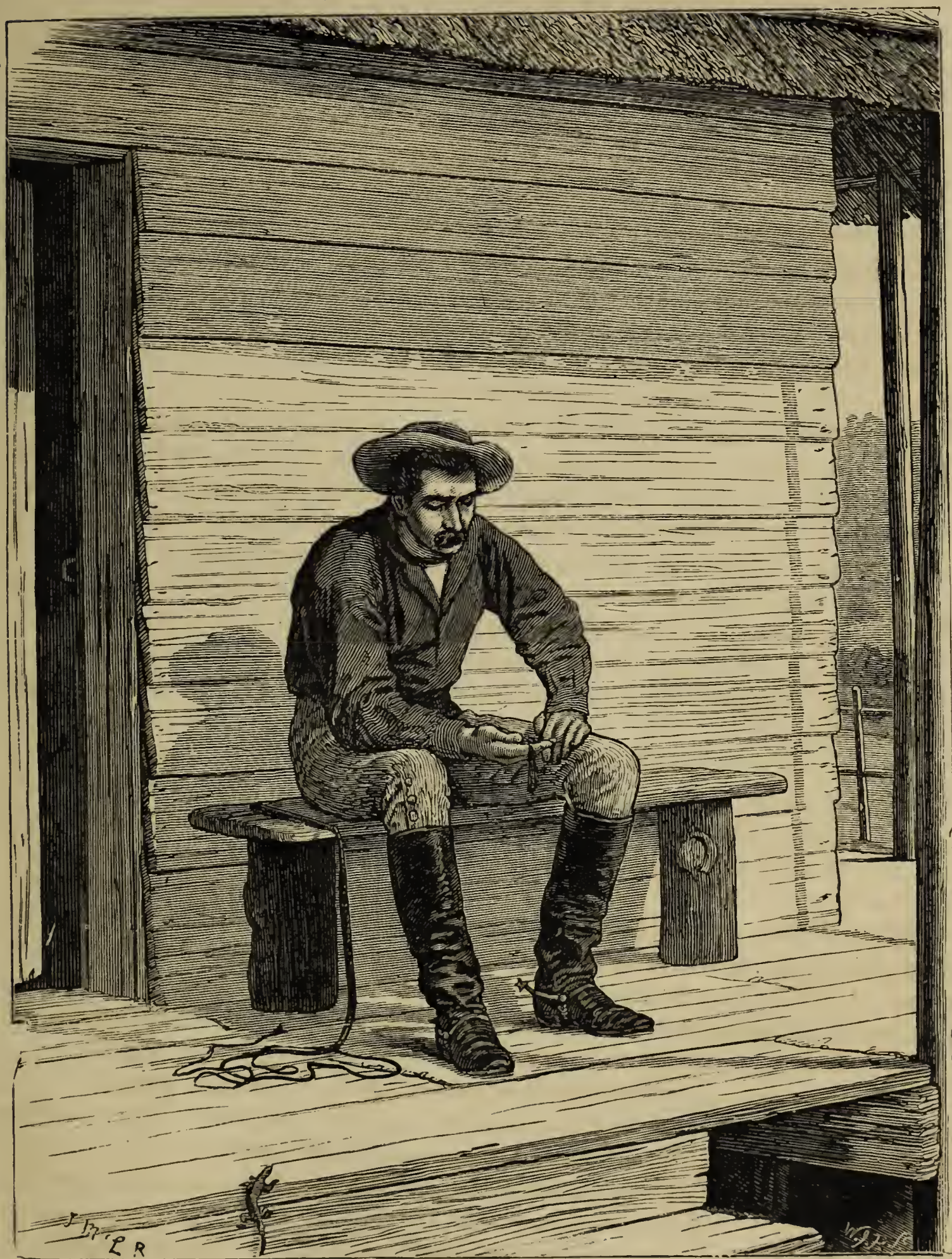
"Villain!" she hissed out, "you dare to weep for her. Well, it is right that you should. You took her away from home and friends, to die uncared for in a garret. You did not see her die—I did. You did not see her pale reproachful face, her poor starving body, her trembling hands. You did not see the hag who swore at her as she tried to raise her last thoughts to heaven. You did not hear the wind as it whistled through the broken pains of the rattling window. You do not know how a beggar would have turned away in disgust from the loathsome hovel in which she died. I do. I saw her die, and as her spirit left her, vowed that your death should be as miserable as her own. And before Heaven, I will keep my word."

She rose to her full height and raised the long keen knife. He gazed upon it and her without emotion. He was perfectly passive. He faced death with composure. What did he care? He must die some day—why, not now?"

"When I first recognised you from the portrait I found in the locket she wore round her neck, it was all I could do to keep my hands from strangling you. I thirsted so much for your blood. But I reasoned with myself. Would she not have willingly died without pain? Would she not have given up her life when he left her? If I killed him now, their deaths will have been unequal. She will have died in the most abject misery, and he without a pang. So I kept my twining hands firmly back, and let you live."

"And now your patience is exhausted," he said, with a scornful laugh, "*et apres*, you have a knife, and I am bound hand and foot. Well, have your way. But you mentioned something about a shameful death upon the gallows a short time since. Has it occurred to you, that possibly such a death may be unpleasant?"

"Worse than a thousand other deaths," she cried. "Think of the trial with its crowd of upturned faces. Think of the warders on either side of you, holding you and keeping you as the hangman's perquisite. Think of the women watching you as the Roman women of old watched the quivering gladiators as they poured out their life's blood on the sand of the arena. Think of the suspense of waiting for the verdict. Think of the cold dead despair of the



"His riding whip, with its long thong, rested on the ground beside him, and the dust on his clothes told of a hard day's work."—See page 85.

condemned cell. Think of the coming day bringing with it death in its most shameful form. Think of the tolling bell, the funeral service read over the living corpse, the plank coffin, and the quicklime."

"You have a powerful imagination," replied Dashleigh; "and as you know the consequences following upon murder I am surprised that you should brandish that knife so fiercely. But I suppose it is of no use reasoning with you—you are evidently a mad woman."

"Yes, I am a mad woman," she hissed, "you are right, I am a mad woman; but I am sufficiently sane to carry out my revenge to the full. I want you thoroughly to appreciate your situation. You are completely in my power, and I have sworn to kill you. You cannot cry, for did you, I would gag you as I would a snapping cur."

"You weary me," he said, "a melodrama, when it's prolonged to unjust limits, degenerates into a farce."

"I think I can still interest you," she cried. "Listen, you have called me mad. It is not the first time I have heard the charge. When I followed my husband in his campaigns, when I stood where only men had stood before, in the midst of blood and carnage—they called me mad. When I seized a rifle and held my place, side by side with the wounded and the desperate—they called me mad. When I helped to turn the cannon's wheel, and filled the shells with powder—they called me mad."

"You seem to have taken a good deal of trouble," observed Dashleigh with a sneer. "I hope your efforts were properly appreciated."

"They called me mad," she continued, "but they also called me brave. They knew I was ready to lay down my life without flinching."

"Great force of character. You are very different to—"

"To my sister," she said fiercely, "thank you for reminding me of my sister's wrongs. What I was ready to do then, I am ready to do now."

"Surely you can commit suicide without calling the hangman to your aid."

"It is not suicide," she said. "I know I cannot live long, my death-warrant is signed. The doctor does not give me a month to live."

"He is less generous than the judge. Five weeks is about the limit at the Central Criminal Court."

"Laugh and jeer as you will—you will have something else to do, when you are led out to be hanged."

"Led out to be hanged! My good woman, surely your madness has its limits! If you kill me (and I really think you won't, as you take so long about it) it will be *you* who will be hanged—not I."

"I am not going to kill you."

"Thanks, you are becoming rational."

She paused, looked him steadily in the face, and then said in a low voice which quivered with hatred.

"I am going to make you kill me!"

He turned pale.

"Ah, at last I have touched you," she cried. "I have said enough to you to prove that I am in earnest. In spite of the composure that now is leaving you, you felt that my words a few minutes since were something more than the ravings of delirium. Listen, I am desperate. I have nothing to live for. I am certain of my death a month hence. My doctor has foretold it. Why should I linger on till then, when now by dying I can reap such a rich harvest of revenge. I have held my life so often in my hand, that it has lost its value. Come, am I so mad as you thought me?"

She laughed a bitter laugh, and drew a bottle from her dress. He never said a word now, but gazed upon her with a panic-stricken glance.

"Why, where is your mirth? Surely the joke is a good one. You said I had no sense of the ridiculous, or I should have laughed at your position. Tied hand and foot in my power. See, I do laugh. I have waited patiently for this moment for years, and it has come at last."

His eyes were watching the bottle which she still held corked in her hands.

"Yes, you are right," she said, "it contains chloroform. I used it an hour ago with great success. To it you owe your present position. I took away your senses to tie you hand and foot. I restored you to your senses that I might gloat over your misery. For you *are* miserable now that you *quite* understand your fate. You have called me insane, but there has been reason in my madness. I have prepared everything with the utmost care. There is not a link in the chain wanting. You will learn all this when your counsel has to defend you when you are charged with murder!"

His eyes were growing dim, his hearing was failing him. The effects of the chloroform already administered were not quite over. He had recovered for a time, but sleepiness, dreadful restless sleepiness, was beginning to oppress him.

"It is the last time you will hear me speak," she continued, taking the cloth she had placed upon the table and applying it to the bottle. "It is the last time that any one will hear me speak. I shall keep my vow to hang you. I have made the rope, and I leave it to others to adjust it round your throat. Listen, you are now a live man full of returning health, far from hopeless, with a possible happy future before you. But I am going to force you to give all this up. You close your eyes upon the world for ever. When you regain your consciousness your fate will be sealed. Your doom will be as much a matter of certainty as if the judge had sentenced you to die an ignominious death. That will come in time. You will have the slow torture of a trial, the heart-breaking delay of a month's respite. Then your hour will arrive. A miserable death, a name coupled with those of felons of the cruelest and most hated stamp. You let my sister die in a hovel, without a friend near her, to comfort her. Now, in your turn, I will let you die within the four stone walls of a jail, with warders for mourners, and with the prison parson to shrive you. Your last sight of earth shall be the scaffold, and your last touch of human flesh shall be the hangman's clasp. You shall die with the despairing knowledge, that while men, did they

know all, would call you innocent, yet in the sight of Heaven, you will seem a murderer, as guilty as Cain himself. Through all the coming days of misery recollect my words. You will never see me living, and when I am dead, remember that in dying I left my curse behind me—a dead woman's curse, that shall reach you beyond the grave."

He tried to speak, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He saw the handkerchief as it pressed against his face. He struggled violently, but could not break away. Again he thought, and the thought came indistinctly to him, "Is this a nightmare—am I awake, or do I sleep?" There was a ringing in his ears. Then he heard, a long way off, a woman's voice and a man's rough tones. Then he lost his consciousness.

For a moment there was silence in the room. Then came a hushed sob and a heavy fall. Then a sharp cry (strangled in its birth) from outside the house. There was a murmur of voices which was soon lost in the distance. Then all was still.

PART III.—REGINA VERSUS DASHLEIGH.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE TOILS !

IT was early morning when Dashleigh recovered his senses. He was seated in the chair in which he had sank the evening before. For a moment he did not like to move. He expected to find his arms tied. To his surprise he found himself a free man.

"What a nightmare !" he murmured, "I could have sworn that the woman was before me now. I wonder if Mrs. Stammers came back last night. She must have returned, because I remember distinctly before I fell asleep, the window was open. Somebody must have closed it." He got up from his chair feeling very weak and feverish. He had placed his hat on the table before him the night before. He now took it up, put it on his head, and groped his way to the window.

"A walk in the grounds will do me good," he said, as he unclosed the shutters, and allowed a flood of glorious sunshine to pour into the room. "What a magnificent morning ! After staying up all night, there is nothing like a matutinal stroll. A lounge for half an hour, and then a good sleep. By noon I shall be myself again."

Without looking back into the room he opened the window and passed out upon the lawn.

The birds were chirping blithely in the trees, the bees were humming busily amongst the flowers, and the face of nature was never more smiling. Dashleigh's spirits rose.

"It was a bold thing to do last night—invading the castle of the Countess and seizing the compromising letter. But it tried my strength ! Ugh ! I shudder when I think of the nightmare that followed upon my adventure ! It seemed so real too !" He walked on down the gravel paths of the flower garden, and then passing through a gate entered the ground reserved for kitchen produce. There was an old man at work, with a rake and hoe, on one of the beds. Dashleigh walked towards him, and found him grumbling to himself in the Devonshire dialect. The man touched his hat, as he saw the Captain's shadow on the ground before him, and then went on with his work and his grumbling. Upon being questioned, it appeared that the old gardener (who was nearly deaf and blind), had discovered that some persons had been invading his vegetable beds. He had found during his morning inspection that the beds had been disturbed. He had seen in several places the foot-prints of a woman and a couple of men. They must have been running recklessly away, as the vegetables had been ruthlessly

trodden down. If the Captain had just come from the house, perhaps he knew something about the matter?

The Captain had come from the house, but had left its inmates sleeping. He consequently knew nothing about the matter.

The old gardener thanked the Captain kindly, and touched his hat once more. This time he looked up and started, as he fixed his feeble gaze upon the Captain's clothes.

Had the Captain hurt himself?

Why, no. What had made the gardener think of that?

Nothing, nothing. The gardener was very glad to hear it. And then, as the Captain disappeared, he comforted himself with the thought, "that thank goodness it was no business of his."

In the meanwhile, Dashleigh wandered hither and thither in a spirit of perfect restlessness. For no reason that he could recognise, he felt a strong disinclination to return to the house. By-and-bye, a feeling of fatigue crept upon him, and he experienced a strong desire to go to sleep. Yawning, and with his eyes half closed, he threw himself down on the ground, covered by the shadow of a tree, which formed with its spreading branches a natural arbour.

How long he slept he knew not; when he awoke he heard the sound of voices. A pair of lovers were in the arbour, unconscious of his presence. A screen of leaves divided him from them, but when they spoke he recognised in their persons Harold Harrington and Fanny Mostyn.

"And so you really love me?"

"Can you doubt it? My darling, with to-day we begin a new life. It will be so jolly?"

"And what did mamma say?"

"When she heard of my good fortune she was overjoyed, and declared that she had always loved me as a son."

"Did you know your guardian, Harold?"

"Very slightly, dear. I only have seen him once or twice, when he came home on furlough from India. He used to look me up at school and tip me. Poor fellow!"

"Poor fellow! But it was very good of him to leave you his money."

"Yes, and I can take it with a clearer conscience because I know he has no relatives to curse me for his inheritance."

"And if I am ever poor, Harold?"

"What will it matter, darling?—we shall have enough for both. And now don't you think long engagements a mistake?"

Dashleigh waited to hear no more. He rose angrily from the ground, and walked towards the house. He felt that his chance was gone. Harold, a rich man, and how could he rival him? What was the use of appealing to Mostyn and his wife? He knew well enough that there would be but one answer to his suggestions. He heard Mostyn exclaiming—

"A very excellent match, sir. One of mutual affection, and suitable in

every respect. I made myself, sir ; and I intend to allow my daughter to choose for herself. I can afford to allow her to do it. She *has* done it, sir—good morning.”

What should he do ? Why, give up the battle and go away. He was too practised a gambler to care to prolong a losing game. Reckless in all things, he was reckless in this. Yesterday he would have gone through fire and water to secure the girl he loved (save the mark !) now he gave her up without a moment's hesitation.

“The luck's against me,” he muttered. “Well, let me accept the situation. I am tired of this dull country life. Let me get back to town. One can live there with cards and billiards. I shall breathe again when I get back to Tattersalls and the club !”

Even as he spoke he was joined by the girl of whom he had been thinking. Fanny, her face suffused with a delicious blush, had just left her lover. Harold had continued his walk to the station where he was to meet Mostyn. It had been decided by the newly-engaged couple that “papa” should be informed of the arrangement as soon as possible. They had parted therefore, one to see the father, the other to take counsel with the mother.

Fanny stopped abruptly as she came up with Dashleigh. As she noticed his disordered dress, his blood-shot eyes, his pale face, she shrunk away from him as if he had been some loathsome creature. He noticed her emotion, and his countenance was lighted up with a sinister smile.

“I overheard your conversation just now, Miss Mostyn, and suppose I should congratulate you. And so it's settled. Well, Harrington is a lucky man.”

She looked at him with a heightened colour. Then her face became deathly pale, and an expression of terror appeared in her eyes. She tried to speak, but the words refused to pass her lips. He gazed at her earnestly, and thought that she had never looked so beautiful as now. The base love he had thought trodden under foot once more asserted itself, and he moved towards her. She shrank from him again as he approached, and trembled with fear.

“What have I done ?” he asked with a forced smile. “Not a week ago, Miss Mostyn, you did not show such repugnance at meeting me. Are you sorry that you deceived me ? Are you sorry that you made me love you ?”

She shuddered as he spoke, and yet she said never a word. Her tongue seemed to be tied by some mighty terror.

“Yes, love you,” he continued, with a suppressed force, that made his voice sound low and hoarse. “You have made me love you, Fanny, with all my heart and soul. Just now when I heard Harrington speaking to you, I felt that I could have killed him upon the spot ! What does *he* know of love ? A man must live to my age to learn the full meaning of the word, and you prefer him to me ?”

Her silence gave him courage. He had expected a torrent of scorn, an avalanche of denunciation. Instead, she met his advances with a stony speechlessness. There was hope in this—so he thought.

"Fanny, my soul, my darling, you cannot mean this. You cannot mean to make me a miserable, reckless man, for the remainder of my life. Some one, some traitor friend, or interested rival, has been poisoning your mind about me. You have been told that I am a *rouè*, a spendthrift, a gambler. Granted I am all three, but as I have had a wretched, wicked past, can I not live a better, nobler future? I have never loved a woman as I have loved you. For Heaven's sake, give me hope. Tell me that you have been playing with this foolish boy, that you have been making him your butt. I will laugh heartily at the deception. He was presumptuous, and deserved to have the joke turned against him. For Heaven's sake, speak, Fanny."

She turned away her head. He thought that his words had touched her, and did not note the terrified loathing in her face. He approached her more closely, and the blood coursed through his veins like lava.

"You must hear me, you must reverse your decision. Give me a chance of retrieving myself in your eyes, before the world. Bid me repent, and I will never touch a card or back a horse again. I will be satisfied to sit at your feet, gazing into your eyes, and feeding upon your beauty. You are not cruel, my darling—no, not cruel. You purposely let me hear your conversation with Harrington to rouse my jealousy. Well, I am jealous and forgiving. Oh my darling, my darling, I cannot give you up!"

He tried to caress her. He sought to take her hand. In a moment she turned round upon him, and fury flashed from her eyes. There was still the expression of terrified loathing on her face, but now it was supplemented with scornful anger.

"Let me go!" she cried, "how dare you touch me? Oh, why did Harold leave me!"

"Is this acting? Do you wish to play the comedy any longer? Come, Fanny, you must not, you really must not treat me so."

She cast him from her, and then pointed to his outstretched palms.

"Look," she cried, "look! there is blood upon your hands!"

He started and found that what she said was true. His hands were as gore-stained as the hands of the murderer Thane himself, after the assassination of the sleeping Duncan. In a moment she was gone and he was left alone.

For the first time, since quitting his room, he examined his outer man. His clothes were torn, and splashed with blood. Blood, blood, blood met him everywhere—on his hands, arms, and legs. His face turned an ashen grey and he trembled.

"What is the meaning of this?" he thought, "what demon's trick is this? Am I mad or dreaming?"

No, it was too true. His first thought was to fly. But where should he go? His garb would betray him at every step. Could he but change his clothes and he yet might get to London. Once in town, and Spain would hold out her arms to him. He ascended a rocky walk in the grounds, and knelt down. He tried to pray. But no, he could not. Then he began to think. A trout stream was running beneath the rock, and he quickly walked toward it. On reaching the

brink, he knelt down and saw reflected in the water his own pale face. His face, too, bore the traces of recently spilt blood! No wonder that Fanny shrank from him, when she saw him thus.

He quickly bathed his face and hands in the running water, and tried to wash his clothes. But the marks on the clothes, the marks calling to Heaven for vengeance, remained in spite of all he did to remove them. He looked towards Mostyn Manor. The place so far was quiet. It appeared to be undisturbed. It looked safe. The money he had was in his bedroom. He would run the risk of going back to fetch it.

With stealthy footsteps he retraced his way. He passed by the old gardener still at his work, treaded the gravel paths amid the flowers, and once more reached the lawn.

As he came to his room he paused and tried to summon up courage to enter. He soon regained his composure. He walked in.

He started back. Stretched on the sofa stark and dead was the woman of his dream. Lying beside her was the long sharp knife he had removed from its leather sheath, only a few hours before. In a moment her words haunted him, "You shall die a miserable shameful death—a death upon the scaffold!"

He turned to fly, it was too late! He was seized and hand-cuffed.

"We were waiting for you, sir," said a sergeant of police, "we want you."

"Want me! on what charge?"

"You are charged with murder."

"Murder!"

"Yes, with the murder of the Countess Donato. It's my duty, sir, to warn you that anything you may say will be used against you at your trial. So as this seems to be a very awkward case indeed, I advise you to be careful!"

CHAPTER II.

DASHLEIGH PREPARES HIS DEFENCE.

THE interior of a gaol. The prisoners were at work in their gloomy cells, and the silence was only broken now and again by the clang of the closing of an iron door. Then the noise would echo and re-echo through the long corridors with their iron galleries and spiral stairs. The warders on duty spoke to one another in an undertone.

"How does he bear it?"

"As coolly as possible. We don't often get such a well plucked one in this little place."

"Any chance for him?"

"Not much. The circumstantial evidence is about as strong as it well can be. The only thing is they don't like hanging a real live gentleman, if they can help it. It's rather rough upon Jack Ketch—he never gets any clothes worth looking at in consequence."

"He was in the army—wasn't he?"

"So they say—long ago."

"Oh, you can see it in his style. A man never loses the mark of the service. Let me see a chap walk a dozen paces and I will tell you in two twos if he has ever been before the drill sergeant."

"Hallo! You are wanted."

The warder walked towards the lodge of the prison, where he found a gentleman in the prime of manhood waiting admittance. He respectfully touched his cap as he recognised Mr. St. George, one of the most respected of the criminal lawyers of the day.

Mr. St. George was a particularly handsome man, particularly well dressed. He stood about six feet two in his silk socks, and looked as if he had just left Rotten Row in the height of the season.

"Mr. St. George has come to consult with his client Charles Dashleigh—203, don't you know—take him to him." And the porter at the gate handed over the cheery, handsome, well-dressed solicitor to the warder.

Mr. St. George followed his guide through the intricacies of the gaol until he reached a lofty transept in which had been built a strange looking room. This apartment somewhat resembled the signal boxes on the railways. It was constructed of wood and glass. The lawyer and his client, when closeted together, could talk to their hearts' content without being overheard, and yet could not avoid continual surveillance.

"Thanks, Bertrand. Will you bring him to me? By the way, is he tolerably collected?"

"Cool as a cucumber, sir. In my long experience I never came across such a cool one."

"So much the better. He will require his wits about him."

"Yes, sir—very awkward case indeed. But if any one can pull him through, *you* will do it, sir."

"Thanks for the compliment, Bertrand. And now, like a good fellow, fetch him as quickly as you can. I have an appointment at Marlborough Street at two."

The handsome lawyer placed a small leather bag on the table before him, and took out some brief paper. Then he selected a pen and dipped it in the ink. Then he arranged the bunch of flowers in his button-hole, and rolled up his lavender kid gloves.

"Let me see," he said, "the last time I met him was at a Woolwich Ball; I always thought him bad form, but I never expected he would come to this."

The glazed door was opened, and Dashleigh was ushered in by a warder.

The Captain had not improved in appearance. His face was wan, and his beard untrimmed. The atmosphere of the gaol had certainly affected him. His clothes were worn carelessly, and his linen was ragged and not quite fresh. His cheek flushed a little as he saw St. George, and his right hand was put forward in a nervous and uncomfortable sort of manner.

"How do you do, St. George?" he said in a voice that shook a little with emotion. "We have not met for some time, and——"

"You sent for me," interrupted the solicitor, apparently not noticing the outstretched palm, as he busied himself with his papers. "As yours is a serious case, I came at once, but I shall be glad if you will be so good as to save as much time as possible. I am due in the West End at two. Those who first advised you were right to secure the change of the place of your trial to London."

Mr. St. George spoke with perfect calmness and courtesy, but his tone was that of a professional man who had met a client for the first time. Dashleigh immediately accepted the situation.

"You are quite right. Let by-gones be by-gones. I wish they could," he said, forcing a laugh. "I suppose you know something about this matter?"

"I have not very much time for reading the papers, but I certainly saw it mentioned."

"Saw it mentioned! Why, the press is full of it. So the warders tell me. You know periodical literature is forbidden in this establishment. I can imagine the sort of leaders that must have been written about me. If I ever get out of this place a living man, I shall make a collection of them. Ha! ha! the book will be a curiosity."

"I prefer to get up the cases of my clients first hand. I have the depositions here of the witnesses examined at the preliminary inquiry. I wish to know what steps we are to take about shaking their testimony."

"Well, if justice is justice, I ought to be acquitted. My defence is perfect."

"So much the better. There is no doubt about the document you gave to Wilson."

"Not a bit. It was found upon me. I had taken it from the deceased."

"You admit that?"

"Certainly. I walked to the Countess's house and took it. It was more my property than her's, and as I knew she intended to use it for an improper purpose, I thought myself justified in seizing it."

Mr. St. George stroked his chin, and looked at his client with a steady glance.

"You know, of course, that it is important we should not deceive one another. If I am to do any good I must know the truth and the whole truth—of course, up to a certain point. No jury will believe that you, a sick man, only just convalescent, managed to walk all the way to the Countess Donato's house—there committed a burglary—and then returned home again. No jury would believe that—out of Wales."

"I can't help that," returned the Captain, "it happens to be the case. As to the walk, on my return I met some one."

"You did," said Mr. St. George quickly. "That certainly improves matters. Well, who is the witness? we must call him."

"I dare say you know him by sight. He attends all the Race meetings. Bob the watcher."

"Are you serious?"

"Perfectly. Why should I not be?"

"Because, Bob the watcher is not a particularly respectable character. I should be afraid to put him into the witness-box. However, we will see. What was he doing on the grounds of Mostyn Manor when you met him?"

"Planning a burglary."

Mr. St. George leaned back in his chair with a blank stare of astonishment upon his handsome face.

"Yes," continued the Captain, "and I promised to close my eyes to his proceedings if he on the other hand thought and said nothing about mine."

"And so you made a bargain with a burglar at the very moment he was contemplating robbery, perhaps murder?"

"Certainly I did. Is there anything so very surprising in that?"

For the first time the stern handsome face of Mr. St. George relaxed. The solicitor regarded his client with something like pity.

"Pardon the question," he said softly, "but have you ever had the taint of insanity in your family?"

"I see what you are driving at," replied Dashleigh, "you want to prove me mad. You won't do it, my dear sir, I am sane enough, and so were my ancestors before me. Take my advice and subpoena Bob, and then I shall have a chance."

The solicitor mechanically made a note on his brief paper before him.

"Do you admit that your hands and face were blood-stained when you met Miss Mostyn?"

"I must. I washed the spots off afterwards before I returned to the house."

"How do you account for those stains?"

"I don't account for them. I haven't the vaguest notion how they came there."

"I see," said the solicitor with a short dry cough.

"No, you don't see," returned Dashleigh, "on my life I don't know how I got them. I was as much surprised at finding them as Fanny Mostyn was at seeing them. On my life I am telling the truth—as my life does not belong to me—let me say on my soul—on second thoughts, perhaps my soul isn't my property either," and he laughed a long and bitter laugh. Mr. St. George pushed aside the depositions.

"I am afraid these are useless. From what you say I do not think you will be able to give us any useful hints for cross examination. As a last resource, I will get you to tell your own story of the fatal evening. I may warn you to be careful—not to tell me too much."

"I can't tell you too much. I have nothing to fear from the truth."

Upon this Dashleigh related his adventures—how he had visited the house of the Countess Donato, seen Bob, and passed the night.

"What made you leave the house in the early morning?" at last asked the solicitor.

"Because I was ill and feverish. I had been suffering from a terrible nightmare. Ugh! It has haunted me ever since!"

"Do you know how the Countess came into your room? Don't answer more

than you please, but remember she was found dead in your apartments. Your bowie knife was discovered implanted in her heart. Again I say, don't answer a word more than you please, but how do you account for *that*?"

"I can't account for it, unless she came to my room and committed suicide during my absence."

Mr. St. George shook his head.

"I ask you, as a man of the world, what jury would believe that, especially as you were covered with blood. No, no, that will never do—we have no case."

"Look here, St. George," said Dashleigh firmly. "You have thought fit to ignore our past acquaintanceship. No doubt you were right, from a professional point of view—let that pass. But although you will not do me justice in the present, do justice to me in the past. I have been reckless, a gambler—what you will—but I have always been a man of honour. Go back into the clubs which I no longer can enter, and ask if there is anything known against the honour of Charles Dashleigh. They will tell you he is a fool, a madman, a fellow who has squandered away thousands, but they will also tell you he was never a defaulter. It matters very little to me if I die or live. Like scores of other fellows such as I, I have contemplated suicide any number of times. It is wonderful to me that I have lived so long. Thank God my people are dead,"—here his voice faltered—"and there is no one to be ashamed of my disgrace. I have only to meet a few reporters and the hangman, if I plead guilty, and save the miseries of a trial. And yet, St. George, I tell you, in spite of all this, I am going to plead not guilty. I am going to undergo the torture of the dock, going to bear the heartless gaze of that cruellest of throngs, the well dressed mob. I have nerved myself to do this. Why? Because I have a coward craving for a chance of life? No! Because I swear before Heaven and earth I am as innocent as yourself. And now, do you believe me?"

The handsome solicitor who had been watching him narrowly during this outburst, merely answered "Yes."

There was a pause. Then St. George said to his client, "You alluded just now to a nightmare. We often get hints from a dream. The mind sometimes acts in sleep, what the body has acted in the hours of wakefulness. It sounds rather unprofessional for a lawyer to make such a request, but tell me your dream."

Dashleigh immediately complied with his request.

"Strange!" murmured St. George when his client had finished. "Supposing this dream had been a reality? Do you know whether the Countess was any relation to——?"

"The girl who trusted me? No, although she bore a most extraordinary resemblance to her. I only met her once before. She was an enemy of mine, or she would not have possessed herself of the paper I gave to Wilson. But she might have been *my* enemy, because she was Harrington's friend."

"Are you *quite* sure it was a dream?"

"No, I am sure of nothing. I have told you the facts, you must draw from them your own conclusions."

The lawyer gathered up his papers, and prepared to depart.

"I shall see you before the trial. I will do my best for you, but I cannot hold out much hope. Good-day."

St. George left the consulting room as Dashleigh was conducted back to his cell. When the solicitor reached the door of the prison, he met the doctor of the gaol.

"Quite sane, my dear sir—as sane as you and I are," was the answer the physician gave to a question that was put to him.

"The mystery of Mostyn Manor is worthy of its name," murmured St George, as he jumped into a hansom and drove towards Marlborough Street.

CHAPTER III.

A TRIAL FOR MURDER.

THE court was crowded. On the bench seated in state, under a huge velvet-sheathed sword, presided an alderman in scarlet robes. On his left were other city officials, and a number of aristocratic loungers of both sexes, who had come down to the East End to enjoy the delightful sensation of seeing a fellow-creature tried for his life on a charge of murder. On the right of the gorgeous alderman was the judge, business-like and dignified. The jury had been sworn in, the counsel were in their places, and the back seats and galleries were filled with a miscellaneous crowd of briefless young barristers, reporters, ugly spinsters, and horrible old men. Everything was ready for the unhappy prisoner, who was to be the observed of all observers in this dismal gathering.

By-and-bye there was a stir as Charles Howard Dashleigh was placed in the dock. The ugly spinsters (laying aside for a moment their sherry flasks and sandwich-boxes) put up their opera-glasses, and had a good, long, steady stare at the pale face before them. Their example was immediately followed by the hard-featured women in silks and satins seated on the bench; and the reporters smoothed out their flimsy and prepared for action.

The prisoner was called upon to plead, and pleaded—"not guilty."

This gave very general satisfaction. The judge saw his way to a historical summing up; and the law officer of the crown was glad to have an opportunity of airing his eloquence upon a subject so worthy of his rhetoric. The juniors were equally pleased at the prospect of finding their names figuring in the papers for some days to come, in connection with a *cause celebre*. As for the ugly spinsters and hard-featured women in silks and satin, they actually beamed with delight. The trial was not to end like a damp squib. There *was* to be a good deal of fizzing, and a very loud bang. It would have been so disappointing had so promising an affair ended with a mild plea of "guilty," and a scarcely interesting "sentence of death." No, the excellent English substitute for the Spanish bull-fight was not to be shorn of any of its glories. So much the better for every body—save the prisoner.

Alas! the course of justice, like the course of true love, never runs smooth.

Before the junior counsel for the prosecution had time to read the indictment there came a hitch. Mr. St. George had been busily talking to the leader for the defence for some minutes before his Lordship appeared upon the bench. The leader showed some reluctance to accept the suggestion which had evidently been made to him by the gentleman from whom he received his instructions. However, in the end he gave in, and rose from his seat. He shrugged his shoulders and spoke.

"I am very sorry," said he, nodding towards the junior for the prosecution, "to have to interrupt my learned friend, but I have to make an application to your Lordship."

The "learned friend" immediately sat down: and "his Lordship" politely bowed to the leader for the defence.

"I have to ask your Lordship's permission to postpone this trial."

This little speech caused quite a sensation amongst the ugly spinsters and the hard-featured women in silks and satin. Were they after all to be deprived of their enjoyment, were they not to be allowed to spend a happy day? They looked at the judge with the utmost eagerness. They earnestly trusted that his Lordship would come to their rescue.

"Surely it is a little late, Brother Porthos, to make the application?" suggested the judge with a gentle smile.

"It is very late, my Lord," admitted Sergeant Porthos with an indignant glance at Mr. St. George, "still I am instructed, that full justice cannot be done to the case of the prisoner at the bar, unless we have time to produce fresh witnesses for the defence."

"Really, really, I do not think that is quite a reasonable request, Brother Porthos. A true bill has been found by the grand jury, and I have seen the depositions. There has been ample time given to complete the case, and I am rather surprised that the case has not been completed."

"So am I, my Lord, so am I."

"Of course, I would not for a moment wish to say anything prejudicial to the interests of the prisoner at the bar. I wish to treat him with the greatest possible consideration—but really, really, I think under the circumstances, it will be as well to go on. The case seems to me to lie, if I may use the expression, in a nut shell," and the judge beamed at his learned brother through his spectacles.

Dashleigh who had been writhing under the gaze of the ugly spinsters and hard featured women in silks and satin, during this conversation, suddenly wrote something on a slip of paper, and passed it to St. George. It ran as follows:—

"Let my trial go on. I don't want to pass this ordeal a second time. I prefer death to delay. For God's sake, let me be tried at once." The handsome solicitor looked at his client, and sighed, and then communicated with Sergeant Porthos.

"I bow to your Lordship's decision," said the leader for the defence, and resumed his seat.

The audience experienced a feeling of intense relief. The ugly spinsters and hard featured women in silks and satin, simpered and played with their sherry flasks.

The trial commenced.

The indictment was duly read, and then the law officer for the Crown got up, cleared his throat, and settled his gown. He spoke very kindly of the more than usually painful duty that had devolved upon him. He alluded to the rank and position once held by the prisoner at the bar, and shed a tear at the thought, that one formerly so favoured by fortune should now stand in such awful peril. He glanced at the disgrace attending conviction which would be so doubly dreadful to a man who, in days gone by, had had the honour of wearing Her Majesty's uniform. He expressed his anxiety, that the prisoner at the bar should be proclaimed innocent through his instrumentality. He hoped that he would be able to explain away the circumstantial evidence—he was forced to say the exceedingly strong circumstantial evidence—which would be brought against him. He trusted, earnestly trusted, that the prisoner at the bar was innocent. Having said all this, he went to work in the most business-like fashion, to prove, without a shadow of a doubt, that the prisoner at the bar must be guilty. It was a very kind and clever speech, and occupied next day a couple of columns in the morning papers.

There was a gentle murmur of applause when the law officer of the Crown, after concluding with a most delightful peroration, finished his "opening," and resumed his seat.

Then came the witnesses.

A sergeant of police proved, that he had arrested the prisoner. He had found his clothes torn and covered with blood. He had on his person the note given to Wilson. In the room, too, was discovered a letter signed by the "Countess Donato," saying, that she would visit Captain Dashleigh that evening "in compliance with his request."

The prisoner wrote on a scrap of paper, "I never received that letter."

The cross examination did not produce much, the letter from the Countess had been found in a pool of blood near the body. It was close to Captain Dashleigh's bowie knife—the weapon with which the murder had evidently been perpetrated. The police had not found a bottle containing chloroform on the premises. This the witness would swear.

The audience looked surprised. What had chloroform to do with the matter? Had this anything to do with the defence?

The police sergeant was succeeded by the footman, who had given the alarm. He had found the body. The room was in great disorder, as if a struggle had taken place. The Countess was weltering in her blood. The bowie knife was driven home into her heart. He had seen the knife in the prisoner's possession the day before the murder.

The cross examination elicited the fact, that the servant had discovered a dark lantern belonging to Mr. Mostyn, his master, in the prisoner's room. He, too, had not found a bottle of chloroform on the premises.

Next came the doctor. He proved being called in, and finding the Countess quite dead. The cause of death was the wound in the heart. It certainly had been inflicted by the bowie-knife. The weapon was still sticking in the wound when he first saw the deceased. The stains on the prisoner's clothes were blood-stains.

He was pressed in cross examination to say whether the death of the

Countess could have been caused by suicide. After a great deal of hesitation, he admitted that the wound *might* have been self-inflicted, but he considered such a theory *nearly* impossible. He, too, had seen nothing of a bottle of chloroform. When this question was put a third time to a witness, there was a roar of laughter. The audience was intensely amused. What had chloroform to do with the case?

There was a murmur of sympathy when Fanny Mostyn appeared in the witness box. The ugly spinsters and hard-featured women in silks and satins seemed quite to take an interest in her. There was a chorus of "poor dear," as she was sworn "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

The law-officer of the Crown and his junior, treated her in the most gentlemanly manner, putting to her as few questions as possible. She merely proved meeting the prisoner at the bar on the morning of the murder, with his hands covered with blood.

Sergeant Porthos declined to cross examine this witness.

"Pardon me, my Lord," said the law-officer for the Crown, seeing his way to a little joke, "but will you kindly put a question to the witness?"

The judge bowed, and motioned the law-officer to go on.

"I suppose that you, Miss Mostyn, did not find a bottle of chloroform?"

There was a perfect shout of laughter. The ugly spinsters hid their faces in their handkerchiefs, and the hard-featured women in silks and satins smiled again and again. Fanny answered in the negative and retired.

The last witness was Harold Harrington, who deposed to the bad feeling existing, so far as the Countess was concerned, between the prisoner at the bar and the deceased. His cross examination took a longer time than the others. Sergeant Porthos seemed to follow on the same side as the learned leader for the prosecution. So far from attempting to weaken the evidence he did his best to make it stronger. Before Harold retired, there was no doubt in any one's mind about the hatred that the Countess felt towards Dashleigh.

"That is my case, my Lord," said the law-officer of the Crown, as the witness retired.

"I think we may now adjourn for lunch," said the judge, looking at the clock, "we will take the defence half an hour hence."

In a moment a babel of voices arose in the court, and the prisoner was removed. And now came the time for the opening of the sandwich boxes, and the uncorking of the sherry flasks. The ugly spinsters left to themselves (the hard-featured women in silks and satins were given luncheon elsewhere), enjoyed themselves amazingly. They passed round *Punch* (which one of them had brought into the court with her), and laughed at the good things of the sage of Fleet Street, with the greatest zest and heartiness. Then they looked at the clock (by this time the sherry flasks had been drained of their last drops, and the sandwich boxes emptied of their last crumbs), and prayed for the time to pass.

After a while the prisoner was brought back to the bar. The judge took his seat once again, and the tragedy of a trial for murder recommenced.

The sitting began with a surprise. The prisoner called no witnesses. "So much the better," thought one of the hard-featured women in silk and satin on the bench, "I shall have time for a drive in the Park after all," and she suppressed a yawn.

Sergeant Porthos commenced his speech for the defence, and then the audience began to understand why the witnesses for the prosecution had been asked the question about the bottle of chloroform. The learned sergeant contended that the Countess Donato had committed suicide, with a view to having her revenge upon the prisoner at the bar, whom she regarded (this had been proved by Harold's evidence), with the most bitter hatred. She had drugged the prisoner, and then had covered him with blood. She was in weak health, and as

a "patriot," was not likely to have any superstitious dread of a hereafter. Admit this theory and everything was plain enough. The prisoner's conduct after the suicide (committed when he was in a state of unconsciousness), was perfectly natural. If he had really been a murderer, would he have walked about with blood-stained hands? No, he would have attempted to secure his safety in flight, or would at least have done his best to conceal the corpse of his victim. As it was, he was perfectly calm and collected, and walked back of his own accord to the house where the murder was committed, and where his arrest must follow as a matter of course.

The learned sergeant concluded with a glowing peroration to the effect that the jury before him were the most intelligent men he had seen in his life, and that consequently they must give his client, the prisoner at the bar, the benefit of the doubt.

The judge summed up, and after complimenting his "learned brother" upon his very ingenious theory, denounced it as utterly ridiculous. It had been shown that the prisoner at the bar had a direct interest in obtaining a certain document in the possession of the deceased, by fair means or foul. He had obtained the document, and it would be for the jury to say, with the evidence before them, what course the prisoner had pursued. Did he induce the deceased to give it up voluntarily, or did he murder her to obtain possession of it? That was a matter for their decision. They had all the facts of the case before them and must use their own intelligence in the matter. He was bound to say that circumstantial evidence was the best possible evidence upon which a conviction could be supported. If they thought that the circumstantial evidence in this case was strong enough to convict the prisoner at the bar, no doubt they would convict him; on the other hand, if they had any reasonable (he laid a stress upon the word reasonable) doubt about the matter, again, no doubt they would acquit him. It was for them to say whether the prisoner had any motive for killing the deceased? Again they ought to decide in their own minds, whether the deceased was likely to give up the document she had taken so much trouble to secure without a struggle. The jury were more than usually intelligent, and he had carefully laid down the law. He was quite sure that whatever the decision might be they might come to, it would be a just one.

Upon this the judge bowed to the jury, and the jury bowed to the judge and retired for about a quarter of an hour.

There was a hush of expectation as they returned. Their names were duly called over and acknowledged.

For a moment the audience fixed their regards upon Dashleigh, who stood calm and pale in the dock, waiting to hear his fate. Then the faces turned towards the jury.

"How say you, gentlemen of the jury, have you determined upon your verdict?" So spoke the clerk.

"We have," was the answer of the foreman.

"Do you find Charles Howard Dashleigh, the prisoner at the bar, guilty or not guilty?"

There was a pause—a deep silence—and then came the answer,

"We find him—guilty!"

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE THE EXECUTION.

THE hours passed slowly in the condemned cell.

During the day before the one fixed for his execution, Dashleigh had sat gloomily silent. His constant companion was a warder, who never allowed him to be out of his sight. His only occupation was to listen to the church clock

outside the prison, as it tolled away the hours. The chaplain had been to see him, but had met with anything rather than a satisfactory reception. Dashleigh had received him with cold politeness ; and instead of joining in prayer had insisted upon entering into controversy. The parson had been attacked in rear and front about his orthodoxy, and had had to retire in some confusion to consult his authorities.

For the first time Dashleigh smiled since his conviction ; and the smile was a bitter one.

Mr. St. George had been to see him once. The handsome, well-dressed lawyer was far more cordial on this occasion than he had been on the day of his visit before the trial. He seemed to be heartily sorry for his client. Strange to say, the prisoner seemed to be more affected at this interview than at any with the clergyman of the gaol. He turned away his head when St. George entered the cell, and pretended not to see the outstretched hand extended to him.

"I am sure I have to thank you very much, Mr. St. George, for all your kindness to me. It is not your fault that I am here."

The lawyer put aside the thanks with a gentle gesture of his hand, and asked several questions relative to the witnesses in the trial. Dashleigh answered them to the best of his ability.

"It is only right to tell you," said St. George, "that I do not think there is a ghost of a chance of reversing the verdict."

"I am perfectly resigned to my fate."

"Still, I may add, that I am moving heaven and earth on your behalf. If you *can* be saved you shall. I will not leave a stone unturned."

"I know it," replied Dashleigh, "you have been a very good friend to me, and you will receive your reward," he hesitated a little as if he were half ashamed of using the word, and then added "Hereafter."

The lawyer looked earnestly at his client.

"Dashleigh," he said, "we have been drawn together by this trial. I have believed you innocent, and in that belief have worked, and am still working, body and soul for you. If your life is saved (the chance is a very faint one) that life will belong to me, for I shall have given it back to you."

The prisoner bowed his head until his forehead rested on his hands.

"Then promise me what I ask. This is the last time we shall ever meet on earth, and these are the last words you will ever hear me speak, swear to me, that if God spares you in His mercy, that in the future you will live a new life. Swear to me that you will repair the past."

"I swear to you, that I will repair the past."

The two men clasped hands firmly for a moment, and then parted for ever.

The days passed rapidly away. Dashleigh refused to see any of his friends—he said he could not bear to meet them in his dire disgrace. Harold Harrington applied to see him, and met with no better success than the others.

"After helping to make the rope which is to hang me, he wishes to assist at my execution," he said with a hollow laugh. "Well, he must content himself with the newspapers—the affair is sure to be fully reported. And if that does not satisfy him, he must fall back on Madame Tussaud's, and the Chamber of Horrors!"

His bitter mood lasted until the officials of the gaol visited him, to announce that the day for his execution had been fixed. He received the intelligence with perfect *sang froid*, and then there was an alteration in his demeanour. When the hours of his life had become unalterably numbered, he became restless and peevish. The chaplain of the gaol, (good worthy man) thought this an auspicious moment for recommencing his ministrations. The chaplain of the gaol was mistaken. The heart of the prisoner was harder than ever. Dashleigh laughed in the face of the excellent clergyman and requested him to leave him in peace.

A few days before the fatal date, the prisoner seemed to summon up all his resolution. He asked to see his rival, Harold Harrington. The request evidently cost him a pang. His lips quivered and his cheek became paler than ever.

On the following morning his rival stood before him. The cell was filled with well-armed warders. Dashleigh was a dangerous man in their eyes, and it was as well to take proper precautions. It was just possible, that the prisoner might occupy the last hours of his misspent life in adding another corpse to the list of his victims.

"You wished to see me," said Harold, "I am here."

"I am a dying man, and in a very short time I shall have left this world and all its troubles. It matters now very little whether I tell the truth or not. All will be over before the end of next week. By that time my body will be consumed in the quick lime beneath the prison stones, and my name will be classed with scores of felons as miserable and as degraded as myself."

Harold said nothing. Dashleigh continued—

"I could leave this world as a man should—with courage and determination—if one favour were granted me. It is in your power to grant that favour, and so I have sent for you. I don't expect much from your generosity, but still I will make the trial."

Harold received this ungracious speech in silence and waited to hear more.

"I feel that I could die (save the mark!) like a gentleman if Fanny Mostyn believed me innocent."

For the first time Dashleigh looked at his rival. He regarded him with an eager, anxious glance, and tried to read his very soul.

"How can I help you in this matter?" Harold asked with some confusion.

"Convince her. She is to be your wife. She will see with your eyes, and accept your words as gospel. Tell her that I am innocent, and she will believe you."

"How can I?"

Dashleigh drew a long breath. Then he controlled himself.

"It is a miserable task that I should have to bend to you in supplication. But I accept it. Look me in the eyes—I know there is a heaven and a hell. The chaplain has pestered me with entreaties to repent, and the repentance is to commence with the telling of a deliberate lie. I am threatened with all the horrors of Hereafter if I do not say I am guilty. Harold Harrington, I have no hope in this world, and little in the next. Still that little I would not willingly throw away. I speak to you as a dying man, looking beyond the confines of the grave, and I swear to you that I am innocent. By any vow you can name, I swear it. You dare not disbelieve me, I tell you, you dare not disbelieve me."

Harold was silent for a moment.

"I will not be judged by you," continued Dashleigh. "We are not equals. I speak with the authority of death. It is your duty, full of life as you are, to obey me. I tell you again, that I am innocent, and I order you to believe me."

Harold paused for a moment, and then holding out both his hands, exclaimed, "I do believe you."

"Teach her to learn the lesson," cried Dashleigh, with a voice trembling with emotion, "and I shall die at peace. I shall face the gallows with unfaltering step, and yield up my spirit with a blessing, instead of a curse, upon my lips. Answer me—will you do this?"

"I will."

"I have no more to say."

"Can I do nothing for you?"

"I have no more to say."

Dashleigh turned away his face, and looked upon his rival never again.

It was early morning in the condemned cell.

The prisoner had slept for a few hours during the night, and his dreams had been haunted with memories of the past. He had lived again his purer better life. He had seen his mother, long since dead, and had listened to her as she spoke once more of his Father in heaven. Then he had seen himself in the pride of youthful manhood, joining his regiment. He had heard the merry voices of his cheery companions. Then his dreams changed, and he was listening to the sobs of unhappy women, and the curses of desperate men. The warder on guard pitied him as he saw him struggling in his sleep.

"Shall I wake him?" he thought. "Better not; whatever his dreams may be, they must be pleasanter than the reality."

At six o'clock the sleeper awoke.

"Where am I?" he asked. Then, as he saw the stone walls and the morning light streaming in through the well-barred window, he continued, "I know. This is the day on which I am to die. Well, I will be worthy of the occasion."

With feverish activity he rose from his boarded bed and hastily made his toilet.

"What will you have for breakfast?"

"Nothing, thanks. Except, perhaps, a glass of brandy."

"You had better keep that till later," replied the warder.

"Oh, you think I will want it! My good friend, you don't know me. I am not going to make a scene. I have led a forlorn hope before now. Death did not seem much less certain than it does now."

Keeping his feelings (whatever they may have been) under perfect control, he talked to his attendants with apparent cheerfulness. He kept up the conversation incessantly; never allowing himself to pause for a moment.

At seven the chaplain once more visited him.

"My good friend," said the worthy man, "at this supreme moment will you not——"

"Stop!" interrupted Dashleigh. "Enough of this. You have insulted me sufficiently. Please to remember that I am a gentleman, and that when you give me the lie when my hands are tied, you are behaving like a coward."

The poor parson started back in great distress.

"Doubtless you mean well; and I pardon you. But get back to your prisoners, your garotters and pick-pockets, and leave a gentleman to die in peace."

Then Dashleigh continued his conversation with the warders; even laughing in the utter recklessness of his bravado.

"Isn't he a game one?" said the warders to one another. "It's quite a pleasure to see him."

Though terribly snubbed the poor parson knew his Master's business too well to leave Dashleigh at such an hour as this.

"My good friend, my fellow sinner, my brother," he said with the tears in his eyes; "will you not repent? There is mercy for all of us; Heaven——"

"Heaven!" cried Dashleigh with a bitter laugh. "What has Heaven done for me?"

The door was opened, and the governor of the gaol entered the cell.

"I am ready, sir," said Dashleigh, with his frame knit together as if it had been fashioned of iron. "I am ready to die!"

"I have come to announce to you that a reprieve——"

Dashleigh heard no more. Every atom of bravado left him. The hard heart was softened; and the poor, miserable, sinful human nature was purified.

He dropped upon his knees: and, with his quivering forehead resting on the cold prison stones, poured out his thanks to his God in a burst of heart-born tears.

THE EPILOGUE.

LAST CHAPTER.

LABORARE EST ORARE!

FAR away beyond the seas. In a land where the Savage is gradually but surely receding before the approach of the civilisation of the European. In a country where muscles and sinews are more than a match for brains. Where every man is at once a master, and yet a servant. Where labour cannot be bought—where every toiler works for his own. In the Far West, in a country destined to be the birthplace of nations yet to come.

It was evening. The sun was setting, and the glorious mountain scenery forming the back-ground of the little settlement was touched with gold. The houses of the pioneers of civilisation were wide apart. Not unfrequently a distance of fifteen or twenty miles divided them. In the most lonely of all these houses, sat a man under the verandah, looking at his watch, and evidently awaiting the return of some one. His riding-whip with its long thong, rested on the ground beside him, and the dust upon his clothes told of a hard day's work in pursuit of wild cattle on the prairie, or in labour on the farm.

"He ought to have been here by now," said he, with another look at his watch, and a further glance at the horizon, "he can't have found out——"

Then he paused, and rose impatiently from his seat. The speaker was a man of about forty, although he looked much older. He wore a short moustache, but the blue colour about his chin suggested that in days gone by he had also grown a beard. His face was full of lines telling of past trouble—just now he was agitated, but as a rule, the expression habitual to him was one of infinite calm. His face suggested the idea of a man who was ending a career, once stormy and adventurous, with the perfect peace associated with the prayers of the cloister. The idea was not so far fetched, after all. The settler spent his days, under endless arcades of trees, or ceaseless wastes of yellow grass, in hard work, and lived a blameless life in perfect solitude. His companion had been away in Europe—at home. He was expecting his return. He it was of whom he was thinking as he looked at the watch and eagerly peered into the coming darkness.

"I should be sorry to lose him," he murmured. "He has become very dear to me. He is the last tie that binds me to man, and I saved his life too, in the bush—that should give me a claim on his gratitude."

As he spoke, there were sounds of a horse's hoofs beating against the hard high road. The sounds grew distincter and more distinct.

"My dear fellow," and the two men shook hands warmly. The new comer was younger than his comrade. He was the type of a good-natured stout-hearted Englishman.

"And so you have come back to me?"

"Yes, Vernon, but not to stay very long. Don't be disappointed, old man, I intend to take you away with me. I am not going to leave you all alone."

"I shall never leave this place," replied Vernon, with a sigh. "It is as I feared, as I feared." Then he continued, "I have lived here for the last five years, and here I shall die. I shall be sorry to lose you, Harry—very sorry indeed."

"My dear old man, you must not take it so much to heart. The truth is, I am going to be married. I have got leave of absence for six weeks, to put my affairs in order over here, and then I return to the dear old country to carry off my bride. Come, why don't you join me? A sober, straight-laced, hard-working

fellow like you, would make an excellent husband. Now, my little woman has a sister, and——”

Vernon heard no more. His thoughts were far away in the future—in the days that were coming, when he would be alone in the house, far away from home and friends.

“What do you say to it?” concluded Harry with a cheery laugh. “Have I converted you? Will you turn Benedict on my invitation?”

“I shall remain here,” again Vernon replied. Then he said with some effort, “And how have you enjoyed yourself? your letters have been short and far between.”

“Enjoyed myself! I should rather think I have. By the way, Vernon, what a humbug you are! You told me, you knew no one in England.”

“Well.”

“You have forgotten one man at least—St. George.”

Vernon turned very pale, “Did he say that he knew me?”

“Well at first he didn’t seem to recognise your name, but when I described him to you, he said, he was sure he had met him before. By the way, he gave me a letter for you. Here it is. Now you read it while I go in. I will get supper ready. It’s my turn, remember—I haven’t done it for the last eighteen months.”

Harry, cracking his whip cheerily, led away his horse to the stable, and then entered the dwelling house.

Vernon paused before he broke the seal. The sun was setting rapidly, and night was coming on with the celerity of Southern climes. Still, there was sufficient light left to enable him to master the contents of the letter before him. It was addressed to Charles Vernon. He tore open the envelope, and read as follows:—

“I think I know you. You will know me, if you are the man I take you to be. I gave you back your life, just five years ago, and you promised to be worthy of the gift. You seem to have kept your word. Your companion in exile insists that you are one of the best and most religious men the settlement contains. I am glad to hear it, and feel that you have repaid me the debt you owed to me, a hundred fold.

“You may remember that you left England, without knowing how your life was saved. At that time, I could not inform you upon what new evidence your case was reconsidered. Now, the chief actors are dead, and I am at liberty to tell you. The interview between you and the dead woman was seen by a witness who waited until the tragedy was acted out. You were drugged with chloroform. The bottle that contained it was dashed into a thousand pieces under the fire grate. Then the woman deliberately committed suicide with your knife. She sprinkled your hands with her own blood, and tore your clothes with her own hands. She had before this so disarranged the furniture of the room, that those who entered after her death might imagine that the place had been the scene of a desperate struggle. It was she who placed the letter giving a purpose to the crime, near the knife, with which that crime was committed. You may ask, why the witness who saw all this was not produced at your trial. She was the wife of a compromised man. She returned to your rooms, after the dead woman had given her a valuable bracelet. She saw the terrible tragedy through the window. Before she could give the alarm, she was seized by her ruffianly husband and his associates. They robbed her of her bracelet, and carried her away into hiding. In the description of your nightmare, you said you heard a woman’s cry—it was the cry of the hospital nurse. With great difficulty I discovered her, and then only forced her to give this evidence, on the condition, that neither she nor her husband should be implicated in the proceedings. The gang of housebreakers gave up their scheme, and decamped the moment she was discovered. Then

holding property of the self-murdered woman, they determined to lie in hiding until the affair had blown over. The man and his wife are now dead, and I send you these details by your friend.

"If you are not the person I take you to be, you will not understand the allusions in this letter—please destroy it. If you are, why then once more I say—farewell.—Arthur St. George.

"Vernon, Vernon," cried Harry from the house, as his companion finished reading. "Come here, old man, supper is ready."

Vernon entered the room used for meals, and the two men were soon seated facing one another at a rough table, covered with homely viands.

"I say I have got a bit of bad news. When I say bad news, old man, I am afraid it will be bad news for you. I have just received a telegram from England—I am wanted immediately at home."

Vernon said nothing. He felt his fate was coming quicker and more quickly.

"Now let me prevail upon you to come back with me. You will be awfully melancholy here."

"Not a bit of it," returned Vernon at last, and he forced himself to speak. "I shall be happy enough."

"What will you do?"

"Why, work. There is nothing like work, my lad, for driving away the sad memories of the past—if we have any! And when do you start?"

"To-morrow."

Vernon exerted himself to the utmost to amuse his companion. Harry, light-hearted and in love, was soon as hopeful and cheerful as ever. He quite forgot that the hour of parting was at hand, and talked about his future plans with untiring loquacity—in his eyes everything was *couleur de rose*.

And as his young companion was speaking so joyfully, Vernon saw his own life as it would be in the many days to come. He saw years of labour in the forest, on the prairie—always alone. He knew that he would live until he was old and weak, and then die perhaps by the hands of the Indians. But he also saw in all this, the self-imposed expiation he had proposed when his life was spared. He felt that in the Far West he need not bow his head in shame—that unknown he might be at rest—and unknown live his life of labour to the bitter end.

At last, as Harry rattled on, the name of "Mostyn" caught Vernon's ear.

"Mostyn," he repeated.

"Yes, that was the maiden name of Mrs. Harrington, such a delightful family, my dear old man. Harold her husband is an awfully good fellow, and I was such a friend with the children.

"So they are married," Vernon murmured, "you say she was happy?"

"I should think so. Why, what's the matter, old man? I haven't said anything to offend you?"

"No," replied Vernon with an effort. "But you have not told me all about them? Did you meet Mr. Mostyn?"

"What, the self-made man! I should rather think I did. After making himself he was unmade by somebody else. It appears that he used to supply the funds to a certain money-lending bank, holding as security for his cash the notes of hand of the unfortunate creditors who appeared on the books of the establishment as borrowers."

"Well?"

"The manager—a fellow of the name of Wilson—it seems used to supply the unsuspecting Mostyn with forged bills. After this sharp man of business had accumulated enough money out of Mostyn's pocket, to satisfy his greed for gain, he quietly withdrew, leaving the self-made man perfectly ruined. Wilson was pursued and very nearly caught, thanks to the efforts of Mr. Poulson the

confidential clerk. But success attended villany in the end, and Mr. Wilson is now quietly located in Spain. When that impulsive country was in the throes of revolution, I quite expected to find the Manager of the Steel and Loadstone Bank turning up every now and then, as a Spanish Chancellor of the Exchequer."

"And what became of the bank itself?"

"In liquidation, my dear fellow. A splendid institution, unknown in this wild land. A man is appointed to divide amongst the creditors an oyster. This he does by swallowing himself the molusc and impartially distributing the shell."

"And so Mr. Mostyn was ruined?"

"Irretrievably. The last time I met him was at the Harringtons, where he was staying on a visit. They have such a delightful place in Devonshire. Quite one of the most charming spots I have ever seen. Mr. Mostyn was in great form when I last saw him. He gave me a catalogue of all his late riches. Told me how much he paid his man-cook, and described the domestic economy of his stables. He kept at one time as many as seven and twenty 'unters,' so he told me. His only regret was that circumstances, over which he had no control, prevented him from asking me to spend Christmas at Mostyn Manor."

"Mostyn Manor?"

"Yes! the place where the dreadful murder was. Surely you were in England at the time. Don't you remember a fellow called Dashleigh—said to have been in the army at one time—who murdered an unlucky Italian countess. Surely you haven't forgotten it. It made an awful sensation."

"No, I haven't forgotten it."

"Well, Harrington and the Mostyns were actually staying in the house when the murder was committed. In the neighbourhood they call the affair 'the Mystery of Mostyn Manor,' because the prisoner, for some unknown reason, was pardoned on the day fixed for his execution. They made a mistake. Guilty or not guilty of this crime, he deserved hanging for many another."

Vernon forced himself to ask a question, "Did Mrs. Harrington believe that Dashleigh was guilty?"

"Well, no, I can't say she did. On the contrary, she defended him, much to the indignation of her father."

Vernon, whose eyes glistened as he listened to the answer, now talked about his friend's departure, and the hours glided by until it came the time to say "good-night."

"You will not change your mind, and come home with me?"

"No, this place is my home."

"Well, you are your own master."

They shook hands, and then a sudden impulse impelled Vernon to ask a question.

"Do you know what became of Dashleigh?"

"There were several stories about him. One, that he had committed suicide—another that he had changed his name, and emigrated."

"And what does Mrs. Harrington believe?"

"That he has bravely conquered himself—she believes that in some distant land, unknown and unaided, he is nobly repairing the past. Let us hope that she is right, and that the poor brute may yet be able to make his peace with Heaven."

"Amen," said the other, in an earnest undertone, "from the bottom of my heart—Amen!"

Scottish Provident Institution.

TABLE OF PREMIUMS, BY DIFFERENT MODES OF PAYMENT,
For Assurance of £100 at Death—With Profits.

Age next Birth- day.	Annual Premium pay- able during Life.	ANNUAL PREMIUM LIMITED TO			Single Payment.	Age next Birth- day.
		Twenty-one Payments.	Fourteen Payments.	Seven Payments.		
21	£1 16 3	£2 10 6	£3 4 11	£5 10 0	£33 0 1	21
22	1 16 9	2 11 0	3 5 9	5 11 0	33 5 10	22
23	1 17 2	2 11 6	3 6 5	5 12 1	33 11 2	23
24	1 17 7	2 12 1	3 6 11	5 13 1	33 16 5	24
25	1 18 0	2 12 6	3 7 3	5 14 0	34 2 0	25
26	1 18 6	2 13 0	3 7 10	5 14 11	34 8 2	26
27	1 19 2	2 13 6	3 8 7	5 15 11	34 16 1	27
28	1 19 11	2 14 1	3 9 5	5 17 1	35 4 9	28
29	2 0 8	2 14 8	3 10 3	5 18 6	35 14 1	29
*30	2 1 6	2 15 4	3 11 2	6 0 1	36 4 0	*30
31	2 2 6	2 16 2	3 12 1	6 1 10	36 14 6	31
32	2 3 5	2 17 1	3 13 2	6 3 8	37 5 5	32
33	2 4 6	2 18 0	3 14 4	6 5 8	37 17 2	33
34	2 5 7	2 19 0	3 15 7	6 7 9	38 9 7	34
35	2 6 10	3 0 2	3 16 11	6 10 0	39 2 9	35
36	2 8 2	3 1 5	3 18 4	6 12 5	39 16 11	36
37	2 9 8	3 2 9	3 19 11	6 15 0	40 12 4	37
38	2 11 3	3 4 3	4 1 7	6 17 9	41 8 7	38
39	2 12 11	3 5 9	4 3 4	7 0 7	42 5 4	39
†40	2 14 9	3 7 5	4 5 2	7 3 7	43 2 10	†40
41	2 16 8	3 9 2	4 7 2	7 6 8	44 0 11	41
42	2 18 8	3 11 1	4 9 3	7 9 11	44 19 9	42
43	3 0 11	3 13 1	4 11 5	7 13 3	45 19 3	43
44	3 3 3	3 15 3	4 13 10	7 16 9	46 19 7	44
45	3 5 9	3 17 6	4 16 4	8 0 7	48 0 8	45
46	3 8 5	4 0 0	4 19 1	8 4 6	49 2 8	46
47	3 11 5	4 2 8	5 2 1	8 8 8	50 5 8	47
48	3 14 8	4 5 8	5 5 4	8 13 2	51 9 7	48
49	3 18 1	4 8 9	5 8 9	8 17 11	52 14 1	49
50	4 1 7	4 12 1	5 12 4	9 2 10	53 19 3	50
51	4 5 6	4 15 5	5 16 1	9 7 11	55 4 5	51
52	4 9 5	4 18 10	5 19 11	9 13 1	56 9 0	52
53	4 13 5	5 2 5	6 3 11	9 18 3	57 12 11	53
54	4 17 8	5 6 3	6 8 0	10 3 5	58 17 2	54
55	5 1 11	5 10 2	6 12 1	10 8 6	60 0 8	55
56	5 6 4	.....	6 14 9	10 13 7	61 3 8	56
57	5 10 11	.....	6 18 8	10 18 8	62 6 5	57
58	5 15 9	.. ...	7 2 9	11 3 10	63 9 4	58
59	6 1 0	.....	7 7 3	11 9 0	64 12 11	59
60	6 6 7	.....	7 12 0	11 14 3	65 16 9	60

* EXAMPLE.—A person of 30 may thus secure £1000 at Death, by a yearly payment, *during life*, of £20 : 15s. This Premium, if paid to any other of the Scottish Mutual Offices, would secure £800 only, instead of £1000.

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THE 40TH ANNUAL REPORT

submitted to the GENERAL MEETING held at Edinburgh on 27th March 1878, stated that the Directors had “satisfaction in reporting the “continuance of prosperity in every department of the business.”

The NEW ASSURANCES were 1891, for £1,081,812:17s., with £35,276 of NEW PREMIUMS, of which £4684 by single payment.

The PREMIUMS received in the year (deducting Re-assurances) were £330,045, and the Total Receipts, including interest. £462,835. The Death Claims in the year were £159,423, including £13,413 of Bonus Additions. The subsisting Assurances were £12,070,636.

The *ratio* of Expenditure continues unusually low, being 11 per cent on the Net Premiums received in the year, or 8 per cent on the Gross Income. *The actual Expenses are greatly under those of any other Institution doing a like amount of New Business.*

The REALISED FUND was at the close of the year £3,101,898:19:6, having increased in the year by £225,807:6s.

Copies of the REPORT, with PROCEEDINGS at the GENERAL MEETING and full STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES, may now be had.

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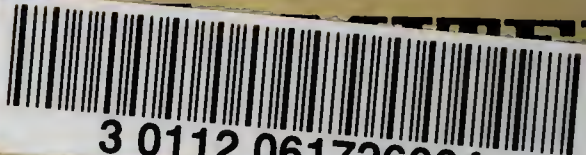
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